





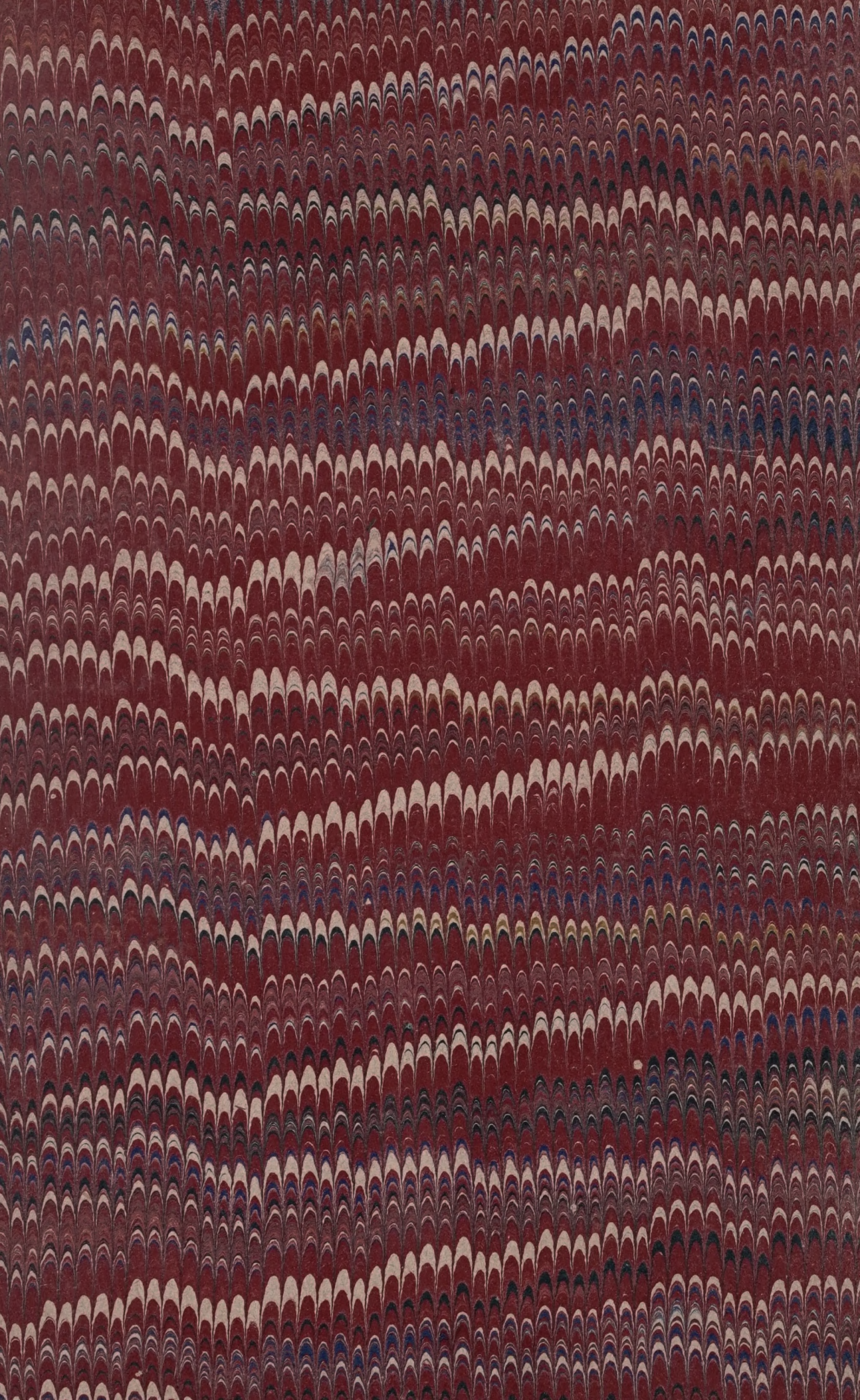
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# CASSELL'S of CHOICE FICTION.

No. 23.

## AN HOUR'S PROMISE

BY  
ANNIE ELIOT.



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NEW YORK.

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**"MAKE HAY WHILE THE SUN  
SHINES."**

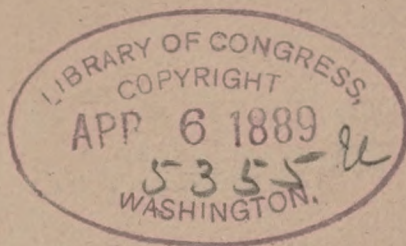
Clean your house betimes, and do it with

**SAPOLIO.**

If you would use Sapolio every week in the year the dirt in a house would be kept down and when house-cleaning time came it would be a pleasant task instead of the dreadful time it usually is. No 34.



# AN HOUR'S PROMISE



BY  
ANNIE ELIOT *Turnbull*

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*Rosalind.* "Break an hour's promise in love?"

—*As You Like It.*

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CASSELL & COMPANY, LIMITED

104-106 FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

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# AN HOUR'S PROMISE.

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## CHAPTER I.

One that knew courtship too well, for he fell in love.

—*As You Like It.*

If two lives join, there is oft a scar,

They are one and one with a shadowy third.

—*By the Fireside.*

THE train kept on its weary way through the Southern forests. It was well it was not a sentient thing to battle with the discouragement of such miles of monotony. A spirit of high endeavor would go near to being crushed by the long-continued presence of those draped, moveless trees, knee-deep in muddy water. Leslie Owen laid down the book he was reading, and, for the



hundredth time, leaned forward and gazed out at the gaunt trunks and branches. As he did so, he was conscious of a sense of positive discouragement regarding the future of the colored race—it did not seem much use after all. Were these not the same woods they had passed yesterday afternoon? The same festoons of gray moss dragged from the limbs—only festoons was not the word to use, festoons seemed to speak of merrymaking—but perhaps this sky was grayer, and this water a shade muddier. Then he threw himself back and looked at his traveling companions. He knew them all by this time, having traveled two days in their company—knew them enough, that is, for all practical purposes, which, in Leslie Owen's case, was by no means extensive. They were not very interesting, ordinary types most of them. An old lady and a middle-aged one were in the next



compartment, both of them well-to-do, knowing quite well what alleviations railway traveling is capable of, and insisting upon not being deprived of them. At the various stations where the passengers stopped for food, they were always well waited on. There were one or two men, like himself, alone, with whom he now and then exchanged a few words. There were two girls, with their father and mother, who, he felt sure, were happy in having no annals. He was conscious of no temptation to disturb their happiness. Across the aisle were two people who had afforded him some amusement. They were evidently on their wedding journey. Neither of them was very young. She had evidently been a school-teacher who had a gift for conversation. Owen suspected that it was this gift that had finally won for her the affection of her companion, so respect-



ful and admiring was his present enjoyment of it. "There is an Eden-like simplicity in a man's admiration for his wife's more elevated forms of conversation," thought Owen cynically. He glanced across at them now. The man had just met a friend in the smoking-car and had brought him in to enjoy his own intellectual pleasures. Not that the bridegroom smoked—Leslie had ascertained that—but he occasionally walked through the car devoted to that pursuit, returning to mention having "been in the smoker," that his wife might not fancy she had married a man ignorant of the more advanced sort of worldly gratifications. "He has acknowledged his wife's superiority, once and for all," thought Leslie Owen again, "but a man must be expected to make up for it somehow."

The presence of the friend acted as a spur to the bride's consciousness of power,



as her husband had been sure it would. They had touched on the subject of Sabbath-breaking. Something, he did not know what, had proved a failure.

“It is because they have to work on the Sabbath,” Owen heard her say. “Nothing ever meets with full and useful development, that necessitates labor on the Sabbath. It has ever been thus. Look at France. How has she descended from her lofty estate! Look at the empires of the world.”

The husband cast furtive, self-congratulatory glances at the friend. “You see,” they said. The friend, who belonged to the same somewhat inferior social scale, was much impressed. He gazed vaguely out of the window, as if to note, at her suggestion, the empires of the world. But there was nothing there but the trees and the moss and the muddy water, to which



Owen, too, had turned again. He felt that he admired this woman who could see the empires of the world, even with her mind's eye, in the face of such an actuality.

And it was into the midst of this sort of thing, that Robert Morton had come to die. That was the thought that came ever uppermost in Owen's mind. It was this which deepened the gloom of sky and forest, and bred a fierce impatience with the apparently unchanging scene. He had been told there was little hope. Should he get there in time?—that was all. In all probability he would; men did not die of such a fever in a day, but meanwhile he might be with him, he felt, listening and watching, instead of fretting at the delays of passage through this accursed country. Owen pulled his mustache savagely, and glared out more moodily than ever. They seemed to be nearing some sort of a settle-



ment now. There were glimpses of lonely roads here and there.

Was it to some such place they had brought poor Robert? Robert, his best friend, who had lived down here for five years, and laughed at the dangers of the climate, only to be stricken down at last with a blow from which there seemed no rallying, even for his strength and will!

The train paused in front of a wooden platform. Two or three negro cabins were scattered about. In the distance, through the trees, appeared the walls of a large, deserted-looking dwelling-house. To the right the road stretched, lonely and winding, over the flat, wooded country. Night was coming on, the gray sky showed rents of crimson in the west, but the sun was going down in clouds. In front of the nearest cabin were four little darkey girls. The eldest, a mature individual of perhaps



five years, was singing, and the little, childish pipe was audible through the car window. The refrain seemed to be a somewhat remarkable statement, physically considered, perverted from its original camp-meeting use: "I'se dot my soul in my right han'."

The two next in age were dancing to this serious accompaniment, their little black heads bobbing up in time to the orchestra, the little black legs keeping step beneath the hem of the short white garments they wore. Apart, on the doorsill, sat the youngest of all, a very small darkey indeed, gravely watching the performances. She did not seem carried away by enthusiasm; on the contrary. Her observation was evidently nothing if not discriminating. It had not yet come her time to dance, but when, in course of years, it should, she flattered herself the dancing would be better



done than that. These were the only inhabitants of the settlement who did not desist from their employments when the train came in.

Directly in front of Owen's window was the store, evidently also the post-office for this district, for an attenuated mail-bag was carried over there. Before the door was the one incongruous figure in the scene. This figure, slender and graceful, in strong relief from the background of general shiftlessness, was that of a girl on horseback, whose horse moved somewhat restlessly to and fro. This motion displayed her remarkable grace, her perfect ease in the saddle, and in the curve of her arm, the turn of her shoulder, her touch on the bridle, was implied a certain strength, which spoke of training as well as natural aptitude. She did not glance toward the train as she waited, but tapped her dress with



the handle of her whip, watching the indolent post-master, not altogether impatiently, but as one who is in haste and knows no possibility of communicating the emotion. Apparently she was entirely unconscious of the long line of windows with the faces looking out with easily awakened interest. She bent forward, still watching the postmaster as he went within, and unlocked with much ceremony the unpromising leather bag. The engine was taking in water, which gave Owen time to see all this. Now it began slowly to move on, but it had not passed out of sight before, looking back with persistent interest, he saw her turn away without a letter, and, urging her horse to a rapid pace, ride down the road into the shadows. As she passed them, the little darkey dancers executed a *pas* of surprising difficulty, with what might have been abandon but for its



solemnity, and Owen fancied he distinguished through the rumble of the cars the soft refrain :

“I’se dot my soul in my right han’.”

He felt a touch of sympathetic regret. “ Probably the mail is her one excitement,” he thought, settling himself back into his seat, and watching the negro porter, as he lit the lamps, whose rays intensified the twilight darkness without. Late the next day he reached the Southern town where Morton lay. They had brought him so far north from the little place on the Indian River, where he had been taken ill. It was his feverish impatience that had accomplished this, the physician wrote ; it had seemed better to yield, than to try to quiet him where he was ; there he but grew worse, day by day. There were delays that seemed never ending to Owen’s fretted soul as they drew near his destination,



in the soft night air. He remembered something about the approaches to the Southern towns having been found difficult by the Union army. He was not surprised, since in times of peace and undisturbed signals and extended railways it was necessary to pause and retrace so much of the way, every now and then. At last he was off the train and being driven through the dim, perfumed streets. Here and there along the way, bright lights shone from open doors and windows, glancing on the glossy orange-leaves. It was late, but within the doors of a large hotel, standing near the road, there were gay voices and music, which floated forth to Owen's ears, as he passed quickly by. He had come from frozen roadways, chilling winds, and gray skies, to out-of-door laughter and midsummer starlight, and the sadness of his errand marked more impressively the contrast.



He left the lights of the short street, and, as the carriage rolled on over the sandy road, where there were no longer houses and open doors, the driver suddenly pulled up his horses—no very difficult matter—and a voice said: "Is Mr. Owen, of New York, in this carriage?"

"Yes," said Leslie quickly, leaning over the low door of the "barouche."

"I am Dr. Fenn," said the voice, as a tall figure outlined itself in the gloom.

"You have not come to tell me—" said Owen, with sudden dread.

"That you have come too late? No," said the doctor gravely. "Thanks," as Leslie swung open the carriage-door, "I will go back with you. Your friend is no worse than he was several hours ago, but that means that he is a very sick man. He has failed much in three days, but I think you will find him conscious. He asked for



you, quite rationally, half an hour ago, and when you were expected. You can talk to him freely. He is quite aware of his danger, and it can certainly do him no harm to relieve his mind of what he wishes to say to you—while he has the strength to speak.”

Leslie was silent a moment.

“You are very good, Doctor,” he said, “to come and let me know the state of things in advance.”

“Not at all. I had intended to meet you at the station, but was detained. I knew you would not want the delay of explanation, after you reached the house.”

Dr. Fenn was a tall, dark man, with eyeglasses. The calm, even quality of his voice suggested confidence. Owen felt that everything must have been done for his friend in the best way possible.

“He said there were no friends except-



ing you for whom he wished to send," began the doctor again, a few moments later.

"No; Morton is singularly alone in the world," replied Leslie. "He had one brother who was killed at Cedar Mountain. Robert was in the same regiment, but escaped." They turned in at a gateway, and drove between groups of palmettoes and spears of Spanish bayonet to the door of a large Southern house.

"I was fortunate in procuring so good quarters," said Dr. Fenn, as he led the way indoors. "The owner of this house is a friend of mine, and put his entire house at my disposal."

Owen went directly upstairs. There were dim lights in the hall. Here and there a negro servant appeared noiselessly. The passages were sweet with out-of-door perfumes. As he entered the sick-room



Robert Morton's eyes turned toward the doorway, brightened with pleasure.

"I knew you would come, old boy," said a very low, feeble voice. And Owen stepped to the bedside and laid his hand on his friend's. His first impulse was that the doctor had been mistaken; for though nothing had been said directly of results, he felt that he had understood him to mean that but one was possible. Morton's eyes were so bright and rational, his voice, though weak, so sustained, that he felt that here there must be some rallying power. But the impression passed; it was but the calm following the anxious, fretting struggle of the last few days—it was not strength. For some time nothing was said. Morton seemed satisfied with the fact that it was in his power to speak when he should choose. He turned feebly on his pillow and seemed to sleep, while Owen sat quietly by the



bedside. At intervals he would wake and speak a few words. Sometimes they referred to the days they had spent together, to past associations, sometimes they were a few brief directions about what should be done in the future. Little by little he seemed to free his mind of what it had seemed so imperative he should attend to, but as the night wore on the words grew more broken and the pauses longer. Occasionally the doctor entered, administered a sedative, whispered a few words to Owen, and went away again.

A little after midnight Morton was lying quietly, and Leslie walked over to the open window and looked out into the darkness. From the distant hotel came the last strains of a waltz; softened by distance, away from all accompaniments of blazing lights and whirling figures, it was like music falling softly from another



sphere. An old moon, with its pathetic suggestions, glimmered on the horizon, the scent of the orange-blossoms seemed to cling and penetrate. There was something illusive, almost theatrically delicious about the music, and the perfume, and the pale moonlight. It was as if he had come into another world where there could be nothing as harsh and positive as death.

“Leslie,” said Morton’s voice, sounding a little clearer than it had for some time. Instantly Owen was by his side. “I have not told you that I am engaged.”

“No, you have not told me,” repeated Owen mechanically. He was very much surprised.

“I should have told you very soon in any case,” went on Morton. “Now, I must ask a service of you. It is that chiefly that I have wanted you for; to do what no one else can do. I want you to



write to her—when some one must write to her. You had better do so in any case, to-morrow morning. I should have asked you to write to-night, but no mail goes till to-morrow at ten.”

He spoke slowly, with long, breathless pauses.

“ But she has been written to—”

“ No, she does not even know that I am ill.”

“ Poor girl,” said Owen involuntarily. A shadow passed over Morton’s face.

“ Yes, poor girl,” he said, “ but I meant it for the best.”

“ And I have no doubt it has been for the best,” the other answered gently. “ I see no reason why not.”

“ I wanted to push on till I was near enough for her to come and take care of me ; but I failed in that. And it was out of the question for her to come so far.



And I wished to spare her unnecessary anxiety—that was at first—so I said nothing. Then I grew worse, and I was delirious, and there was no one to write—and it seemed to be too late.”

“I see.”

“There was no one but Dr. Fenn I could trust, and though I could trust him perfectly, I did not wish him to know—he comes from thereabouts.”

“Yes.”

“I see I was wrong, now, for she has been wondering at the reason of it all. She has been riding down every day for a letter, poor child, and there has been none for her.” A thrill of tenderness passed over the sick man's face. “None at all—for nobody else ever writes to her.”

Like a vision there passed before Owen's eyes the forlorn post-office, the dark stragglers before its door, the girlish figure on



the restless horse, waiting—in vain—and then the loneliness of the same girlish figure as it went on up the darkening road. Perhaps it was in some such scene as this, that the woman Morton loved had waited.

“I have told you where to find my will,” he went on, his breath growing shorter, “I have left it all to her, except the little that is yours—for old acquaintance’ sake, you know—I know you have enough without. Another provision I must trust to you verbally. Dr. Fenn has done everything, he has proved the sort of man one meets not often—then in his direst need.”

Then followed a few murmured words in relation to business affairs.

Owen had always admired his friend’s grasp of business, the details of property and its management; his head seemed



wonderfully clear now. When he had finished, he fell back exhausted. Leslie gave him the restorative Dr. Fenn had ordered, and he breathed more easily. Owen's hand was steady, but there was a tense look about his mouth which told of rigid self-control. This was the third night he had passed almost without sleep, and it was his best friend that lay dying. Morton opened his eyes.

"You are sorry, aren't you, Les.?" he said, with what seemed the old boyish inflection. It was too much. He dropped his head in his hands a moment. "Yes, you are sorry, and so will she be sorry. You two, that is about all."

Owen felt a throb of jealousy at this. It seemed an intrusion, this mention of her as one with him in suffering. This girl, of whom he knew nothing, and whom Robert must have known but a little time. God



knew how much they had been to each other !

“ Say me the ‘Prospice,’ Les.”

How often they had quoted it in the old days ! With a voice that hardly trembled, Owen repeated Browning’s beautiful lines :

“ I was ever a fighter, so one fight more,  
The best and the last.”

He paused an instant after that, and Morton smiled. When he had finished, he saw that his eyes were closed and that he breathed more easily, so he leaned back in his chair with his hand over his eyes and waited. He had not to wait long. Once Morton’s lips moved. Owen leaned over him, “ With God be the rest,” he was repeating. Dr. Fenn came in as the gray light of the morning grew warmer, and together they stood silently as Robert Morton went quietly from one sleep to another.



## CHAPTER II.

He was ever precise in promise keeping.

—*Measure for Measure.*

It was ordained to be so, sweet.

—*In a Gondola.*

By daylight, Dr. Fenn was seen to be a younger man than Owen had fancied the evening before. In fact, Leslie had been so absorbed from the moment of his arrival that he had made few observations outside of the imperative needs of the sick-room.

He realized, now, however, that he had been impressed from the first by a calm and decided personality, an absence of all fussiness or obtrusiveness of any kind, which he had associated with the experience of an older man. Apparently Dr. Fenn was not yet thirty, so he concluded



the next morning. He was a long, dark Southerner, good-looking in an indifferent sort of way, his indolent Southern intonation contrasting with the somewhat terse form of his professional and business-like statements. Without a trace of officiousness, he was of the greatest assistance in all the arrangements that Owen had to make. When it came to the question of his own remuneration, he firmly put aside all the generous proposals that were made, and persisted in treating the matter on the strictest business principles. He had been instructed to spare no expense in the various arrangements for moving and establishing the sick man, and had fulfilled his instructions, and for all these expenses he was prepared to furnish memoranda. For his professional services he would make the usual charges, and would accept nothing further. Owen urged the fact that the case



was most exceptional, that he had gone from place to place for the sake of a stranger, and that Morton, and he himself, felt under a heavy debt of gratitude.

“It was all in the day’s work,” Fenn said with his lazy smile, and he went on with that absence of consonants which makes life seem an easier thing south of Mason and Dixon’s line, to say that he had been traveling without an object save the re-establishment of his own health, which had suffered under an attack of malaria; that consequently it was an easy thing for him to go from one place to another, and that there wasn’t any law against a man making his living in the easiest way he could—any more than there was any obligation incurred in letting him. He reckoned there weren’t any Northern views of state rights that were going to controvert this. Then he smiled again. In thinking over their



interviews, Owen could not remember that he had seen him smile except those two times. His ordinary expression was that of a not unamiable gravity. Evidently his own affairs were the only ones that could be appropriately dismissed with a smile. Morton had had no wish that his burial-place should be at the North, so all arrangements were made for the funeral there where he died. Everything that Owen could do had been done—except one thing, and an hour before the mail closed Owen sat with his pen in his hand prepared to do this—to write the letter announcing Morton's death to the woman who was to have been his wife. It would not have been under any circumstances an easy thing to do, but in the present case it seemed to Leslie doubly, trebly hard. She was an entire stranger to him, he could not judge what would be,



for her temperament, the easiest way to break such a blow. She had had no preparation whatever, unless Morton's long silence had prepared her. He fancied she had few interests, few friends—"no one else ever writes to her," Morton had said. However he might word it, he felt that he should be doing a brutal thing, and Owen was a man peculiarly averse to brutality where women were concerned. He could not rid himself of the picture of the girl he had seen at the station—he had forgotten the name of it. Would she ride down, as that girl had done, and ask for a letter, after so many fruitless rides, so many long days when there had seemed but one event to look forward to, to look back on, the arrival of the mail? Would the lazy postmaster hand it to her, after scanning curiously the superscription, and she, grasping it eagerly, would she



be warned by the strange handwriting? Would she tear it open in sight of those good-natured, idle, interested faces, or would she turn away and ride some distance up that lonely road before she dared break the seal? He pictured her disappearing around the curve, a slender, graceful figure, going into the shadows with her terrible grief. Owen had a very acute perception of emotional phases. He threw down his pen with the half-formed intention of going himself to tell her. It was a dreadful thing for a woman to bear such a blow as that alone. He glanced at his watch, before he recognized the impossibility of departure. He had lost fifteen minutes, and that letter must leave at twelve o'clock. It was the injunction of a dying man. He took up the pen again, and then he remembered, what in the press of other matters he had forgotten, that he



did not know her name. He knew he could find it in one of Morton's papers, but he disliked to begin the work of looking over letters or memoranda, while his friend was still lying dead upstairs. The fragrance of the doctor's cigarette came in through the open window, mingled with sweet aromatic scents. Should he ask him if he could throw any light on the subject? He was curious to know if Morton had mentioned her in his delirium. Then he remembered Robert's objection to asking the physician to write for him. He had known her, he said. Probably there were some complications of secrecy. There was nothing to do except to look for a letter or address, and he rose and went up to the room where most of his friend's possessions had been placed. He found easily a package of letters bearing postmarks of recent dates, neither was it difficult to de-



cide which were from the woman he wished to address. There were two or three of them, mailed at intervals of several days, and directed to Mr. Robert Morton in a feminine handwriting, somewhat unformed, but by no means characterless. Owen paused with the first one in his hand, startled by the name of the place written on the outside, in the straggling characters of the postmaster, as a primitive postmark—Embree, Ga. Surely that was the place where the train had stopped for water, and where he had watched the delivery of the mail. That was the girl then—he had felt it from the first—it could not be anybody else. He glanced at the signature,:

“Yours, my dear Robert, affectionately,

“ALTAMERA.”

What an odd name, and not of much use as an address, but probably all that was



necessary for identification. There were no other letters in a woman's script. Owen took up a memorandum-book, and glancing over the leaves found a page of addresses. There were a number of them, but he recognized the one he sought for, Miss Altamera Clayton, Embree, Ga. He had found what he wanted, and laying aside letters and book with the instinctive reverence we feel toward inanimate things never to be touched again by their owner's hand, he went downstairs to write. Dr. Fenn was still smoking in front of the house, where a *Maréchal Niel* was opening its creamy buds in the warm air. He looked up from his magazine as Owen passed the window.

"The boy is waiting to take your letter when you get ready to send it," he said.

"It will be ready in twenty minutes," answered Leslie.



The doctor nodded, knocked the ashes off his cigarette, and returned to his article on germs. Leslie took up his pen for the third time with resolution. It was harder than ever to write the letter now that the blow was to be dealt at a flesh and blood reality, rather than an idea, but it must be done immediately. It was a little difficult to know how to begin. He finally decided on, "My dear Miss Clayton," rather than any more formal mode of address. It was the most natural, and seemed more friendly—it might be something to her to know that even a stranger was moved to friendliness. Somehow he fancied her lonely and to be rendered especially desolate. He never found much difficulty in the way of expressing himself, and it was only the second sheet that he folded and placed in its envelope. This is what he had written:



“MY DEAR MISS CLAYTON :

“My relations with my dearest friend, Robert Morton, give me a right to address you. It was his wish that it was from me that you should learn what a loss has fallen upon you—a loss that I shall share, though in a different degree. There is nothing that I can say that will make what I have to tell you anything but a bald announcement of a terrible fact. Robert was taken ill less than three weeks ago, since which time he has grown almost steadily worse. Last night he died calmly, undisturbed save by regrets on your behalf. He had put off letting you know of his illness, in the vain hope of sparing you pain, hoping that he might reach a place where it would be possible for you to meet him. Delirium intervened, before he realized the futility of this hope. Last evening, on my arrival, I found him capable of leaving with me all messages and directions, among which the most impor-



tant were concerning you, of whom he spoke with the tenderest affection. The funeral will take place to-morrow in this place. I defer, until after that, any further communication beyond the fact of our great loss.

“Believe me, with respect and sympathy,

“Yours,

“LESLIE OWEN.

“TO MISS ALTAMERA CLAYTON.”

He felt very tenderly toward the girl his friend had loved, as he walked toward the door with his letter. It sounded cold, perhaps, but surely demonstrativeness was out of place. It was singular, now that he thought of it, that he had no positive message to deliver; no last words which he might repeat to her as deliberate testimony that Robert's heart “was faithful to die as live.” It had been like him to send none.



"Where is the boy you spoke of?" he asked the doctor from the doorway.

"Madison," called Dr. Fenn, and an aged but still vigorous negro appeared, and touching the hat which would have seemed insufficient protection in any but a tropical country, took the letter and disappeared.

Owen went back and threw himself into a long lounging-chair which stood by the open window. It was the first time that he had had to think, and his heart grew heavier with the sense of his loss. Yes, it had been like him to send no last message. He had never been a demonstrative man, though an intense one. Morton had been several years older than Owen, but they might have stood shoulder to shoulder through perils that the older man had passed through alone, so fast had been their friendship. Owen, who had moods



of finding his own character unsatisfactory, sometimes said that the best thing about him was Robert Morton's friendship for him. He had felt at one time that he knew his every thought and shade of feeling, and though they had been separated for the last few years by distance, there had been no cloud over their intimacy.

For this reason, the announcement of the engagement had been a shock. He would not have believed that Robert would so long have left him ignorant of so momentous an experience. Besides, he had known all about Robert's other love affair—he had had but one. That had been so long ago, and he had seemed so entirely to put aside all thought of sentiment with the hope of that stormy time, that Owen had ended by believing that a man may sometimes love but once—a



theory entirely foreign to his usual experience. She had been a handsome woman, that other ; was a handsome woman now. He sometimes doubted that it was all her fault that she and Robert were parted. With all Robert's impassiveness he had been a tremendously sensitive man, and he might easily have misunderstood. But certainly the look of things had been against her. There was no object in going back to that old time, however. Robert had loved again—he wondered if it were more wisely and less well.

Dr. Fenn strolled into the room to find another book. Owen liked, better and better, the look of his long, dark figure and the sound of his musical voice. He watched him as he moved about the room without speaking, looking for what he was after, with his cool intentness of manner. No



wonder Robert had liked this man. Had it been a mutual attraction?

Fenn had never betrayed anything beyond a professional interest in his patient, but it seemed impossible that he should not have recognized his strong claims to something beyond that. Owen followed him as he left the room, and sat down by his side in the shade of a bitter orange-tree.

When the next day was over the two men left together on the night train going further south. Owen was obliged to go to the place where Morton and Fenn had met, and where the former had been taken ill, to see the lawyer, with whom had been left the will of which he was executor. Dr. Fenn was returning there to make a longer stay. By the beginning of the following week Owen was again in the train traveling through the dreary swamp land



of the Southern States. He had left in the lawyer's hands all arrangements to be made with Miss Clayton. He had thought at first that he would stop at the station, whence he could be driven to her house and see her, but had decided that it would be better not. She might consider it an intrusion, and in the little note with which she had answered his communication there was nothing that betrayed any wish to see him and learn more of what only he could tell her :

"DEAR MR. OWEN," (it began)

"I have often heard " (here she had written "Mr. Morton" and erased it) "Robert speak of you. I can not believe that I shall never see him again. It is too dreadful. I have been very, very anxious, but this news is worse than anything I had thought of. I am very, very glad that you were with him. It was better to have you than anybody ; Robert would have felt it



so. I can not write any more now, for I feel too badly. Yours very truly,

“ALTAMERA CLAYTON.”

Leslie had been touched by the almost childish tone of the letter. Poor little girl ! It had been hard for her to write at all she felt so badly. Evidently all was confusion and grief within her mental horizon. He hoped some time he should see her, and meanwhile he could always hear of her through the lawyer. For Robert's sake he should never lose sight of her. He had written to her a second time, stating briefly their relations through Morton's will, and giving her his New York address, where he hoped she would call upon him if he could ever be of service, for the sake of the man to whom they had both been so near. The second day of the journey homeward, as they approached the clearing where



stood the little post-office, with its neighboring shanties, he grew restless. Finally he rose and walked to the platform, where he stood as the train drew up beside the apology for a station. There was a slight rain falling, and there were no stragglers sitting about the post-office door ; they were occupying boxes just inside, and watching with interested solemnity the ragged official who crossed over deliberately for the mail. It was unavoidably suggested that when there was no train coming in these observers entirely lacked active employment. Two of the little black performers had disappeared, but the second one—one of the dancers—who had evidently an eye not only for artistic effect, but for commercial advantage, stood awaiting the train with a bunch of yellow jessamine. A grave little ebon figure clothed with a single garment of white



cotton, which had the advantage, unshared by more elaborate toilettes, of being unharmed by the rain, she stood, holding up the shining, yellow blossoms, which seemed to borrow brightness from the surroundings. But nowhere in sight was there any horse bearing a graceful rider, no glimpse of a woman's dress, though Owen strained his eyes up the winding road. He tossed a coin to the solemn little figure, which immediately unbent, and as the train moved on he returned to the car with the fragrant mass in his hands, realizing that if she had been there the train, in all probability, would have gone on without him. As long as there was any trace of road or clearing he gazed out of the window, but in vain. He had felt sure that he should not see her, he told himself. Poor child. Her letter had come—and no one else ever wrote to her.



### CHAPTER III.

If we do meet again, why, we shall smile.

—*Julius Cæsar.*

There were certain ways when you spoke—

—*Too Late.*

“I SUPPOSE there will not be enough men,” said Miss George, leaning back in her chair, and tracing unnecessary designs on the blotting-paper. Miss George was a tall, handsome woman of thirty-five, with black, heavy hair, splendid dark eyes, and a creamy skin. There was a suggestion of energy in her quietest attitudes, but not of restlessness ; she rested as successfully as she did other things. Her companion, on the contrary, adapted herself to the curves of the deep, luxurious chair in which she was seated, with



an apparent indolence capable of thwarting the most spirit-stirring influences.

She was idly fingering the heavy tassels which fell by her side as she watched Miss George at her work of making out a list of invitations. She smiled in reply to this observation, but evidently had nothing to offer by way of suggestion.

“To be sure, there never are enough men in these latitudes,” went on Miss George, as one who is willing to take life as it is, after all. “But it seems as if I ought to be able to think of others. In the first place there are those that one always asks—I have them all down ; then there are those one does not ask unless one has to—I have most of them,” and she drew her pen slowly down the list she had made out. “Then there are those that one likes to have, but to invite whom necessitates more or less of a compro-



mise with one's dignity—I have several of this class—shall perhaps end by having them all—those who never call, you know, and don't care to talk to one at balls. I don't think of any new men just now—which is the final division.”

“Do you know Mr. Leslie Owen?” asked the girl in the arm-chair, with the sweet, drawling intonation that betrayed the fact of her Southern origin.

“Why, yes; do you?” and Miss George looked at her companion in surprise.

“Oh, I don't really know him,” she responded tranquilly, “but I have heard of him.”

“Lots of people have heard of him—particularly girls. He has knocked about so much that he has friends in every State of the Union. But I am surprised, Altamera, that you know him, because you said you didn't know anybody.”



The girl's eyes had grown grave, as she still gently swung the tassel to and fro, and she did not answer immediately.

"Well, I reckon I don't know him," she said at last.

"I had Leslie down once," continued Miss George, returning to her list, "but struck him off because—because I was not sure he was in town, I think; but if you know him, he is worth a trial," and she scribbled his name on her sheet of paper.

"I'm sure you needn't ask him on my account," objected Altamera.

"I am very glad to do so, child," answered Miss George. "I do not know why I hesitated; I sometimes do when I have not just seen him. If I have, he goes down as a matter of course."

There was silence for a few moments while Miss George completed her work. In the year that had passed since her lover



died, Altamera had changed very little from the unconscious girl whom Owen had watched from the car window. She was exceedingly pretty. Her fair hair waved on her forehead very nearly to the line of her clearly marked eyebrows, except when she pushed it back as if annoyed by its weight, when the short, thick locks fell in confusion over her temples. This careless treatment of her hair was characteristic. There was about her always an entire absence of regard for possible effect. Her blue eyes, over which the eyelids drooped slightly when she was quiet, were always raised when she was addressed, with a charming attentiveness. Her mouth and chin did not lack firmness, but were not obstinate.

“Leslie Owen,” began Miss George, somewhat thoughtfully laying down her pen, “is an interesting man. I do not



think I am misled by any personal emotion if I say he is fascinating. As far as I can remember, and my memory for such facts is still keen—Leslie Owen has never bored me. That is, if he only knew it, in itself something of a triumph. Yes," she added, as if to herself, "I always do Leslie Owen justice."

"Are you easily bored, Cousin Lena?" asked Altamera.

"Oh, very easily. And what is more, it is something I will not put up with. When people bore me, even my most intimate friends, I abandon them and get a new set. When you begin to bore me I shall send you right straight back to Georgia. I shall be polite about it, you know, but go you must."

Altamera smiled with sweet indolence.

"I believe I will," she drawled.

Miss George boasted of her inconstancy.



Possibly the faith of her friends in her devotion was greater than her own.

On the day of the party Altamera was, for her, a little restless. This restlessness, to be sure, consisted in nothing more than one or two objectless journeyings from one room to another, a vague way of looking at a book, a question now and then about the arrangements for the evening. But for Altamera, whose indolence was a positive quantity, only to be interfered with for good and sufficient reason, these slight signs constituted restlessness. She was dressed, and waiting in the reception-room, half an hour before there was a possibility of arrivals. Miss George, who was as rarely too early as too late, came in and found her there with surprise.

"I expect you think I'm in a sure enough hurry for this party, Cousin Lena,"



Altamera said, smiling. "Well, I don't want to lose any of it."

It was late when Leslie Owen entered the room. As he waited an instant before he could speak to his hostess, his eyes fell on a new face. Not an unusual experience in a city drawing-room, but this was an unusual type. Its owner stood before a heavy, dark curtain, slowly swinging a large, round, feather fan. Her dress was quaint with a quaintness other than that of a fashionable affectation. Leslie decided, with some masculine diffidence, that it was the cut of the thing that made it seem a bit more old-fashioned, than that of the beauty just beyond, Miss Stanforth, whose high-shouldered gown belonged to a period at least a century earlier. The man who was bending over this unconventional girl was evidently permitting himself to be entertained. This was all he had



time to observe, for Miss George was ready to welcome him, and there was a pause in the arrivals so that he could talk with her for several minutes.

"My cousin has met you, or heard of you, or something," she said, with some indefiniteness, after the exchange of a few remarks.

"I am happy to have received even such very vague attention," he replied. "I am afraid that it is that she has met and forgotten me."

"I do not know—perhaps it is. She is rather an unusual young woman. It may be that she is capable of forgetting you. Do not say that she has, you hope, further claims to originality than that."

"Miss George always expresses one's ideas so much better than one can one's self," said Owen, smiling.

"I am forgetting my duties," she went



on, turning with him to another part of the room. "I am afraid, do you know, that you are the sort of man to make a woman forget her duties."

"I am very sure that I never make you forget yours," said Owen, answering her half-satirical glance.

They paused before the girl with the old-fashioned gown. The large, round fan stopped waving, and the young man looked around as if he considered the appearance an interruption.

"Alta," said Miss George, "let me present Mr. Owen,—my cousin, Miss Altamera Clayton."

As Leslie bowed, a rush of recollection came over him with an overpowering surprise. He raised his head to meet the glance of blue eyes which had a little amusement in their depths and a good deal of frank curiosity. He lost, for an instant,



the sense of a lighted drawing-room; he almost fancied he caught a scent of orange-blossoms—no, it was jessamine, she had some in her dress. For almost the first time in his life he had nothing to say. It was she who spoke first.

“I expect you are surprised enough to see me here,” she said.

How he liked her Southern voice. “I am so surprised,” he said, “that it seems absurdity to tell you so.”

The young man, who had been listening to Miss Clayton, felt that she had met an old friend, and left them.

“And is it really *the* Miss Altamera Clayton?” asked Owen stupidly.

“Yes,” she replied gravely, “it is *the* Miss Altamera.”

And that was the only reference that either of them made to the past. Nevertheless this past was continually in Owen's



mind, at least. It was a visionary background against which he saw her prettiness and took note of her personality. He felt as if Robert Morton were there, observing the impression that the woman he had loved was making on his friend. He wondered if it were this thing or that, that had fascinated Robert. Before the evening was over he felt that it might have been half a dozen things. He decided that her simplicity had had as much to do with it as anything else. That other woman had been a very complex sort of person. Altamera made most people appear complex, he concluded. Evidently it had never occurred to her to ascertain what it was the best thing to think on any given subject before she made up her mind. He had heard of the refreshment of bringing an utterly inexperienced intelligence to bear upon old questions.



He felt that Altamera would afford this.

“Have you met Miss George’s cousin?” asked Antoinette Swift, as he stood leaning over her where she sat, just inside the conservatory door, which framed for them the low reception room. One could hardly fail to notice Miss Swift’s profile wherever she was. Leslie remarked it now: her long eyelashes, her straight little nose, her perfectly rounded chin, were singularly pretty, as she turned her head to look after the subject of her question. She was not a great beauty, but she carried herself well, and a certain poise which marked her whatever she did made her a noticeable girl always. She dressed perfectly, with apparent simplicity, but it was not the simplicity that a tyro might venture to imitate. She did not live in New York, but visited there



often. Owen had met her only once or twice.

"Yes, I have met Miss Clayton," he said.

"I remember now, I saw you talking with her. She has an odd name—Altamaha—what is it?"

"Altamera."

"Oh, yes, Altamera. Did she tell you it was the name of the place in Georgia where she was born?"

"Yes, she told me."

"I thought it was nice of her to say it was in Georgia," went on Miss Swift thoughtfully. "For I should never have known."

"She did not mention the State to me," said Owen, smiling, "and I was entirely at sea. I hope, if she discovered my ignorance later, she will not set it down to a culpable indifference to my country."



"I am always a little afraid such ignorance may suggest to a Southerner an ill-meant reference to the late rebellion—a contemptuous want of interest. I feel that my sensitiveness is over-done, however—more than theirs is likely to be."

Miss Swift spoke in low, even tones, with very little animation but with admirable distinctness.

"I fancy Miss Clayton is not one of that sort," observed Owen.

"No, I fancy not. I think she would have mentioned it, if she were. She told me about her name, and that she had never been North before, and that she rode a great deal, and that she did think Northerners were a little cold. I think she is charming. She is diffusive. I wish more of us were diffusive."

Leslie wondered if Altamera had mentioned her engagement to Miss Swift.



Miss George, undoubtedly, had been informed of all the circumstances. It was a singular state of things. What he said, however, was on a different key. "I am thirty-two years old," he announced; "my education has been somewhat neglected in the higher branches, particularly geography. I am a civil engineer, and a fairly good tennis player. I am exceedingly fond of nautical pleasures, as represented by boating and soft-shell crabs. I detest picnics and afternoon teas, and I—"

"That is enough," interrupted Miss Swift, laughing. "Your character is before me, an open book. It is only a question of turning the leaves."

Their eyes met an instant, an amused questioning in his, a little satire in hers, veiled by a decided indifference.

Later in the evening he was again watching the swinging of the round, stiff fan,



which it seemed to him might be awkward in other hands, and listening to the sweet, lazy voice. Altamera was telling him about her life at home. She had an unquestion-reliance in the interest of her auditor which was very pretty, and which Leslie may be pardoned for thinking was due in part to their peculiar relations.

“It was right funny,” she was saying; “we were all down in the hammock, and he came down from the house after he had found out we weren’t there. Kentucky, that’s my maid, she told him she reckoned we’d gone after persimmons, and told him to go the wrong way, just as I said, but he’s just stupid enough to go the right way when he has been told the other, like some men are, and when he found us, it was too late to do anything, and he said, ‘So you all came down here after persimmons, did you?’ And I said, ‘Yes,’ we did, we



wanted some in a hurry, and he looked around and said, 'If that's so, it's mighty funny you didn't come where there were some bushes.'"

Then Altamera laughed, and Owen laughed, too. He had a very hazy idea what she was taking about, but although he could not see anything very funny, it was quite certain that he ought to have done so.

He was watching the color in her creamy skin, and noticing how ivory white her throat was against the white lace that was twisted about it. "I expect I looked like a gooseberry," she concluded. "But we were always doing things like that."

"Wasn't it a little hard on the object of all this diplomacy?" suggested Owen.

"Oh, well, you know I didn't want to see him," answered Miss Clayton calmly.



Evidently this was reason enough always—that she did or did not want it.

“And if it should be somebody that you did want to see, what would be your tactics then?” inquired Leslie.

“Oh,” she laughed, “then I should be sitting in the parlor, and I should see him coming, for we always see people coming at Embree, and I should go and look in the glass, and then I should take up a book, and I should be mighty surprised when he came in. I should take all that trouble, if it was somebody I wanted very much to see.”

There was not a shadow in her eyes as she looked gayly up at Leslie. It puzzled him, for it seemed to him as if she must have shared his thought.

As he lighted a cigarette and walked away from the house that evening, it occurred to him as not unlikely that Miss



Altamera Clayton would give him a good deal to think about. The idea was not unwelcome. It was with a pleasurable degree of excitement that he reviewed the bonds that made their acquaintance special, beyond any that she might have formed within the new circle in which she found herself.

There was room, too, for much congenial speculation regarding what might be her personal characteristics. She seemed to him a type. To a certain sort of man, and it is equally true of a woman of the same tendencies, there is a subtle danger in the discovery of a type.



## CHAPTER IV.

Come back with me to the first of all.

—*By the Fireside.*

I am myself indifferent honest.

—*Hamlet.*

ALTAMERA CLAYTON became the fashion in the set to which Miss George belonged. It was a discriminating set, and its members decided that a quaint and unusual charm belonged to Miss Clayton, which became veritable fascination upon a closer acquaintance. Women liked her because she made no attempt to outshine, and because she appreciated with such frank and pretty acknowledgment everything done for her pleasure.

Men found her attractive for the divers and by no means unvarying reasons which



go to make up the final cause—that they found her attractive. Owen, who made several attempts to analyze the potency of this cause, decided that much of it was owing to the combination of indolence and vivacity which made up her character. She fell naturally into all sorts of lazy attitudes when she was talking, or watching others. With her hands folded in her lap and her head resting on the velvet cushion of a sofa, or even sitting erect, her head upturned, listening with her attentive smile, her rounded wrists and fingers resting idly on the arms of her chair, you would have called her listless. This idleness once disturbed, however, she was another person. She danced like a soap-bubble, she rode fearlessly and superbly, she threw into whatever she did a spirit which seemed to belong to energy alone, and yet she was as far from being energetic as Miss George's



systematized activity was from the lazy grace of her many hours of idleness.

Miss George's suggestions had modified somewhat her primitive style of dress, wisely leaving untouched, however, the hint of personality which its simplicity gave. Little details, unknown to any but a practiced eye, were altered here and there, making, instead of a badly fitting gown which nevertheless had contrived to be charming, a dress which was attractive still from its unconventionality, but which seemed an artistic part of the wearer's peculiar grace.

"The Arcadian must be preserved," Miss George had said, during a consultation bearing upon this subject. "It is not often we come by the Arcadian naturally, and when we do, we must not think of disposing of it, but we must make allowances for the climate."



Altamera had not the air of a person with a history. There was no shadow, apparently, intruding on the enjoyment with which she entered upon the novelty of her city life. This was a puzzle to Owen, to whom it seemed as if this girl's nature should have been as easily read as that of a child of ten. Since that first evening she had spoken of Robert Morton several times, always sweetly and gravely. She had asked one or two questions very simply, listening to Leslie's replies with tears shining in her eyes.

"Robert was very good to me," she had said more than once. But there were no hints of a lost and irrevocable happiness, no outbreaks of passionate protest against the futility of life and love. Yet in the sort of existence she had led, her love for Robert Morton and his for her must have been the one grand central fact, the first



thing that had come into it to make it something else. For Leslie knew all about her life now. Well, she was young and she had forgotten. But that slender, forceful horsewoman who had ridden down through the pines, day after day, for tidings of her lover,—he had not thought she would forget. A little resentment for his dead friend, who had given so much, mingled with the strong attraction Altamera exerted over Leslie. If she had been wrapped in regretful memories of the past, he would have been stirred by jealousy of what was beyond his reach. Owen was a man whose feeling toward a woman must always be one of complications.

Miss George, she told him very soon, knew nothing of her engagement, beyond the fact that there had been one which had lasted but a short time. She had asked no questions on the only occasion that the



matter had been referred to. Miss George cared very little for details. She had none of the feminine fancy for knowing all about a thing, unless such knowledge was necessary. She lived a very full, busy life, meeting and entering into relations with a great many people whose past she had no time to review and whose future she had no inclination to forecast. She had always kept up some communication with her mother's Southern cousins, and when she learned that Altamera had a wish to travel, now that independence made it possible, she had written to urge her to spend the winter with her. She had received her with a warm welcome and no inquisitiveness concerning what might have been the small events of what must have been a quiet life.

It was not all at once that Altamera told Owen about her Southern home, and the



life she had lived there with her uncle and aunt and cousins, to whom she had not been indispensable. He saw her very often. She recognized from the first, as he hoped she would, the fact that their relations were something different from those existing between her and any other person. She began unconsciously to depend upon him in certain ways which she would have been the last to fancy dangerous. Owen, perhaps not as ignorant of the danger, was equally indifferent to it.

Often it was in the midst of a crowd of dancers, or in the smiling, elbowing, aimless crush of an afternoon tea that Owen would find Altamera and listen to and answer her confidences of the past and speculations concerning the present—for the future she took no thought at all. Sometimes it was in Miss George's reception-room, with its heavy curtains and dainty



furnishings, where he had seen her on that first evening, sometimes in the library, where Mr. George liked to find his daughter's friends when he came in to write a letter, find a book, or merely to poke the fire energetically for a few moments. Mr. George was one of those men who never found time to do any one thing long, unless it was to approve of his daughter. She had brought him up to do this, and now that he was old he showed no disposition to depart from it.

Miss George's friendship for Leslie was evidently strong enough to admit him on an intimate footing when he chose to assume it, yet they were not very intimate friends, nor were they particularly fond of each other. With the readiness with which she accepted everything else about Altamera, Lena George concluded that she had fallen in with Owen in the South, in some



way that made it entirely natural that she should see so much of him. The post of prudent chaperone was perhaps not one of the many that Miss George was fitted by nature and education to fill. Leslie came late to a ball given by Mrs. Mark Swift with the assistance of her niece Antoinette, who was visiting her. He was not apt to be early, but he concluded that this was confoundedly, if not unprecedentedly late, when he found that he could not get a dance with Altamera until the very end of the evening, and then only because a young woman was obliged to drag her brother away, an unwilling victim, leaving a vacancy in Altamera's list of engagements which Owen was permitted to fill. Meanwhile, he did not stand about the room with the picturesque but somewhat unsocial air of one whom man delights not, no, nor woman neither; nevertheless, he was not too ab-



sorbed to maintain a pretty accurate knowledge of Altamera's whereabouts. A short time before the dance came, which he was conscious of awaiting with something like impatience, he paused in the doorway looking into the large room, where superbly dressed women were moving to and fro turning up charming profiles, looking back over ivory shoulders, or raising unfathomable eyes to men of whom there seems, pictorially, so little to say in a ball-room beyond the important fact that they are there.

"That Southern girl has a deucedly pretty arm," drawled a young man next him,—*"Miss Clayton, you know. Thought Southern girls were generally thin. Don't know why, I'm sure,"* he went on meditatively. *"No particular reason why they should be. Don't wear themselves out the way Northern women do, I fancy."*



"I never understood that the curves of beauty were defined by the lines of latitude and longitude," answered Owen dryly. The observation displeased him for some reason or other. Not that a man hadn't a right to speak of a pretty arm. It was not a theory of his that when a woman wore no perceptible sleeve, it was for the purpose of keeping her arms under a bushel, as it were, but just now the approval struck him as unpleasant. Even the speaker's unassuming distrust of his own logic failed to propitiate him.

Altamera was standing in the middle of the room. The waltz music had come to an end for the moment. She had danced with the very last strains, and then paused, waiting just where these had left her, and raising her eyes to her partner's face, listened to what he was saying as quietly as if they had been talking for half an hour.



Her faint color had deepened a little, her eyes had lost their droop and were like stars, her very dress seemed vibrant with the spirit of the dance, its light, diaphanous folds floating lightly away from her feet. She did not stand, she was poised—and yet she was entirely quiet. Her expression was that of a child at a party—a child who is sure that after the biscuit will come cake, and with the cake ice-cream, and after the ice-cream—perhaps—mottoes!

“‘I wish she were a wave of the sea, that she might ever do nothing but that,’” said a grave voice on Owen’s other side. He looked around at the speaker, a tall, distinguished-looking man.

“How are you, Harwood?” he said. “When did you come back?”

“Yesterday,” answered Harwood briefly, as they shook hands. “Who is she? I’d like her to sit to me for ‘Haste,’ or the



‘Spirit of the Foam,’ or something of that sort.”

“To-morrow you wouldn’t,” said Owen, smiling. “To-morrow you would want her to sit to you for a Lotos Eater.”

“Is that so?” questioned Harwood. “I wonder would she do?”

Just then a man standing behind Altamera carelessly put his foot on her dress. She turned and, leaning backward, lifted with her left hand the dainty skirt, in an attempt to draw it away. He stepped quickly aside, with a hurried apology for his awkwardness, and she looked up smiling into his face as if he had given her a bouquet. It was a pretty attitude and gesture, and showed the soft lines of her figure with peculiar grace. Then she laid her hand on her companion’s arm and crossed the room with him. Apparently he complimented her on her good-nature,



for as Owen stepped forward, he heard her languid tones as she said:

"Well, I reckon I haven't got quite such a fiery Southern temperament that I can't stand anybody's stepping on the hem of my gown."

"Miss Clayton," said Owen, offering his arm, "I have been waiting for you."

"You don't leave me many minutes' grace, Owen," laughed her present escort.

"My dear fellow, what are your minutes to me?" replied Owen. "It is Miss Clayton's that I am looking after. She has made me ruler over only a few, and I intend to be even more faithful than if they were many."

He led Altamera back through the ball-room, and seated her in a shadowed alcove, curtained off by a lifted portière. Resting on the cushioned window-seat, she leaned indolently against the closed shut-



ters. She looked extremely young; her simple white dress was made in a youthful fashion of round waist and full skirts, and her bare arms and throat were childishly fair. From one hand, covered with its long, tan-colored glove, hung a fan. It looked as if it might fall any moment, but the careless grasp was firm and the plumes rested against her dress motionless, as she watched the shimmer and glance and sparkle of the room before her. Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Possibly Altamera was tired; she had been dancing continually.

"And this is not Embree," she said at last. "Oh, no, this isn't Embree, at all. Yet I'm Altamera Clayton just the same. It's real hard to believe it sometimes."

Leslie took the fan from her gloved fingers. "But you are not just the same Altamera Clayton," he said. "You do not



even carry the same fan you did the first evening I saw you," and he opened and shut the shell sticks of the one he held.

"I reckon you'll break it," she said tranquilly, making no effort to take it away. "No, that other one," she went on, "Cousin Lena said it would do for some other gowns, but it wouldn't do for this. I thought it was very fine when I had it in Georgia."

"It was a round one of stiff, pink feathers," said Owen, "and you had on a dress with something white around your neck."

"Yes," said Altamera, "I did. You remember things mighty well, don't you?"

"Some things," he answered. "Indeed, sometimes I find it impossible to give myself the luxury of forgetting."

She looked at him for a moment as if she did not quite understand him.



"Well," she said composedly, "I don't see why you should want to take the trouble to forget me."

Leslie looked straight into her eyes, and saw there not the slightest touch of coquetry, though his own, he was sure, must have betrayed to a keen observer that to do that he would have to take a great deal of trouble indeed.

Just then Antoinette Swift came down the long room.

"There's what I call a sure enough beauty," said Altamera, with enthusiasm. "You all talk about Northern girls walking so much more than we do down South, and perhaps they do, but they don't all know how to walk. Now Antoinette does."

Leslie watched Miss Swift critically as she came toward them. She did carry herself remarkably well, and she was very



successfully gotten up throughout. The superb simplicity of her white dress, without a line of ornamentation to mar the perfect closeness with which it fitted every curve of her figure, the string of pearls around her bare neck, the plainly dressed hair, drawn back from the low forehead and twisted about her remarkably well-set head, every detail was appropriate and defied criticism.

“I know you have conceived a boundless devotion to Miss Swift,” he said coldly, “but she is not the style of woman I admire, though I am entirely willing to admit that she is admirable.”

Perhaps it would be unfair to inquire too closely into this statement. He had not been chary of his admiration of women of this style in earlier times, but he was sincere to-night. To-night she seemed too carefully finished, too successfully attentive



to detail. Her apparent unconsciousness of the glances that followed her as she moved was but a higher consciousness. The indifference of the slight smile with which she spoke and listened was as studied as its attentiveness. Her apparent ignorance of what went on about her was an affectation. As he looked again at Altamera he found Antoinette artificial.

"That is because you don't know what a pretty woman is, then," Altamera was saying warmly. "I tell you she is right down pretty."

This accusation of Altamera's was not one to which Owen felt he had laid himself open, and it amused him. Antoinette paused before the alcove, and laying her hand on the heavy crimson curtain, stood there a moment, looking in and smiling.

"I had saved this window for the wall flowers," she said. "If a person can not



be attractive here she can be attractive nowhere. You do not need those red shades on the candles, Altamera. I had expected you to defy the full glare of the gas-light."

"I reckon I may as well be here as you," answered Altamera easily. "I expect that was what you came for."

Antoinette's escort laughed.

"Miss Clayton knows a good thing when she finds it," he said brilliantly.

Leslie had risen and stood waiting. He was always handsome, and perhaps particularly so just now, but apparently Miss Swift did not think him worth a glance. She might almost be said to ignore him entirely, which surprised Owen. Women, when they spoke to other women who were his companions, generally looked at him. Once or twice before it had occurred to him that he was ignored by Miss Swift.



"You are a diviner, Altamera," said Antoinette, her white arm still sweeping aside the curtain, her head a little thrown back. "You perceive motives. I am afraid of you, for you do not know compromise." She paused an instant, looking down at Altamera. "I am not sure that you do not make me feel artificial."

Owen looked at her with swift surprise, but she did not see it. She had quick perceptions. She had analyzed the impression Altamera made, as he had done, though it was a less natural thing for her to do.

He would have been better pleased if she had recognized also his own appreciation.

"As my aunt's guest I must leave you undisturbed," added Antoinette, and she let the curtain swing back into place, and turned away.



"This is a mighty nice party, Antoinette," said Altamera.

Miss Swift looked around over her shoulder.

"There have been times when we all thought that about parties," she said, and this time her eyes met Leslie's; and there was a touch of amusement in them as she moved away. Owen could not see why Miss Swift should have found him amusing. The musicians began to play again as he sat down by Altamera.

"Aren't you going to ask me to dance?" she said.

"No," he answered. "I would rather sit here. It is too crowded to dance, besides."

Owen liked to be imperative with women now and then.

"Well, I reckon some one else will ask me," said Altamera composedly.

"You shall not dance with any one else,"



Owen said. "This is my waltz, and you are to say you are engaged for it."

"Oh, well," and she smiled lazily. "I believe I will, if you are going to talk like that. I don't want to quarrel."

She had not moved since he had first brought her there. She sat leaning back against the shutters, the hand from which he had taken the fan still falling at her side, the other lying idly in her lap, her eyes still following the shifting figures of the ball-room.

"And are you sorry it is not Embree?" he asked, as if it were just now that she had said it was not.

"No ; why should I be sorry?" she answered. "I am never sorry that I am not somewhere else. I was lonely at Embree, and I never went to parties, but when I was there I was happy enough. I used to ride and go rowing on the branch.



Sometimes I did think I'd like right well to be down on the Gulf again, where I learned to sail a boat,"

"So you can sail a boat?"

"Oh, yes; I can sail a boat. I used to go out alone. You think we Southern girls can't do anything, but now, we can."

"I think you Southern girls can do a great deal. What else did you do at Embree?"

"The last part of the time I used to ride down and get Robert's letters," she said, her voice a little lower. It was the first time it had been she who introduced his name into their talk.

"Yes," he answered quickly, "I know you did."

Should he tell of his vision of her while he was yet ignorant of any tie between them? No, not here and now; his artistic sense bade him wait. Besides, would



she understand the mingled pity, sentiment, and sympathy he had always felt for that then unknown rider. Probably not. Notwithstanding her engagement, she was childishly ignorant of the inflections of love-making, he had decided,

“Robert told me that you did,” he added.

“I used to wait for him to come, sometimes. Then one day I found your letter. Do you remember that letter you wrote me?”

“Yes, I remember it.”

He could not well forget it, and how he had wondered what manner of woman she was to whom he was writing. He seemed almost to catch the scent of the doctor's cigarette as it came in through the open window. The letter had seemed inadequate then; it seemed doubly so now. Why had he not filled it with expressions



of the tenderest sympathy? Why are we always so determined to err on the unemotional side?

"I expect that was when I first felt that I would like to go away," Altamera said. "Not just then, perhaps, but later." She paused a moment. "There was so little to do, and Robert had said he would take me away. And then—I gave it up."

Owen read all a woman's grief and a child's disappointment in that last sad little sentence.

"Poor little girl!" he said.

She glanced up at him with questioning eyes. She might have read a great deal of tenderness in his. He would have liked to kiss her, but this method of consolation was too primitive for the occasion. Apparently she saw none of this, for she went on quietly :

"But I was happy in Embree, too—right



happy. But I don't wish I was back again. I'm not like that. I think you Yankees are all alike."

"Oh, no, we're not," said Owen. "Heaven forbid!—and we are not all Yankees."

"Yes, you are," she persisted. "You all seem to be thinking of another time when you were happier,"

"I can't seem to remember any," he murmured, but she did not heed him.

"There is Antoinette now. She ought to be happy and I reckon she is, but she always seems to be thinking of another time when she liked things better, and so do you. There's Cousin Lena too. She is always doing things, but she doesn't enjoy them as much as the things she's done before. But perhaps—"

She paused. Owen looked at her steadily with a question in his eyes, and she answered his look. Neither spoke, until



Altamera said, without finishing her last sentence :

“ Oh, yes, I know.”

“ How long have you known ? ”

“ From almost the first. Robert told me.”

“ Does Miss George know too ? ”

“ She has no idea.”

“ Don't you think you should tell her ? ”

“ Why ? ” questioned Altamera calmly.

“ I don't believe it would make her any happier. If Robert had lived she must have known, and I expect it wouldn't have pleased her. If there's any happiness for her in his death, I reckon she ought to have it.”

“ But — ” began Owen, and then he paused. He was struck by the truth of what she said. Perhaps this was the solution of one of the difficult questions he had thought of, by a perfect simple and straightforward mind—the right and true solution.



The music was still floating on with the undertones of regret which run through the strains of popular waltzes. The final cadences were positively despairing. Is there not enough pain and bitterness and disappointed passion in the world, since they mingle even with our lightest amusement? He looked at Altamera, who was watching him with a glance of calm assurance.

“But if she ever knows—”

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Altamera swiftly; “I will tell you.” She leaned forward and lowered her tones a little, for the music had stopped and, though the sound of voices and the frou-frou of dresses still filled the room, conversation was more audible.

“When Robert told me he had once been engaged, he did not tell me the name of his sweetheart. He seemed to think



perhaps I would care that he had loved some one else ; but I didn't—I am not like that. Then once he heard Uncle John speak of Lena George. He saw her once, when he came to the North just after the war. Robert was so surprised and asked a great many questions, and afterward told me it was she. I was more interested then, and he said a great deal about her. Well, then—afterwards—it seemed to me as if I knew Lena George better than I knew anybody else, and she was my cousin, and we think a great deal of cousins at the South. When she asked me to come and see her I thought I would tell her all about it, and perhaps she would like me better. But when I saw her, I didn't think so. I see we are different ; she would not like that a man should love another woman, after she had once loved him. She has never spoken Robert's name,



but I can see. Now I reckon she will never know, for I shall not tell her—and I believe you won't."

Altamera smiled as she said the last words, and leaned back again. She had explained herself. But Leslie, too, was under conviction. He was struck by the readiness with which she reasoned in her careless fashion of a nature so entirely different from her own, but he was not satisfied. She knew Lena George surprisingly well, but he knew her better. Moreover he also knew the world better, and undoubtedly it would be easy to show her her mistake.

"But, Altamera," he said, and he did not know that he had called her by her first name—apparently, neither did she. "She is sure to know it some time; such things are always known sooner or later, and then she will feel that



you have been unfair—treacherous, perhaps. It will be unjust, I know, but even women as wise as Lena George can be unjust sometimes. It will be better—much better—for you to tell her.”

Altamera shook her head, smiling still.

“I don’t think I’ll tell her,” she answered. “She wouldn’t like it.”

“But certainly she will not like it when she finds you know so much of her past life, of which you have appeared to be so ignorant,” persisted Owen almost impatiently. He would have been more impatient if she had not been so pretty, perhaps.

“She has a right to expect that you will be frank with her.”

Altamera pushed her hair back from her forehead, in the careless way she had, and it fell in short, roughened locks away from her white forehead. It made



her look more childish and unconventional still. She leaned forward again, and looked, less indifferently, into the room.

"They are beginning to dance," she observed. Then turning again slowly to Owen, she said :

"I guess I'm right."

"Miss Clayton," said a man's voice, as a dress-suit obstructed her view of the dancers, "this is ours, I think." She rose instantly, and passed out with him. As Leslie followed, she paused in the doorway, as Antoinette had done, and looked back.

"I believe I won't tell her," she asserted, smiling.



## CHAPTER V.

Oh, speak'st thou in sober meanings?

—*As You Like It.*

All's our own to make the most of, Sweet,

Sing and say for ; watch and pray for,

Keep a secret or go boast of, Sweet.

—*A Pretty Woman.*

ONE other time Owen touched on the subject of Altamera's relations toward her cousin, and Robert Morton's relations to them both, but after that, not again. He met the same smiling, childish assertion, which he now recognized was a very hard thing to move. She had considered the question, and explained her decision, why canvass the same ground again? She felt, amiably, that Leslie showed a peculiar persistence in bringing up the subject



a second time. Owen felt that his personal responsibility ended with this unsuccessful effort. He was sure that it was better that nothing should be said, than that he should be the one to speak. Miss George, although her natural nobility of character led her to disavow it, even to herself, had never been able to quite crush a slight sense of resentment toward Leslie Owen, and he understood this unspoken sentiment. He had known of her happiness, he had blamed her imperiousness, he had surmised her grief, and she could not entirely forgive him any one of these things. For two years they had been entire strangers ; then they had met accidentally, and the breach had been ignored. After that, Lena George had remembered that he was Robert Morton's best friend, that even in his partisanship he had tried to be a better friend to her than had been



her own willfulness, and she was generous enough to let him see that she felt it, and the matter had been silently understood between them. On his return from the South, he told her of Morton's death, and she thanked him for the way he had done it. It would not have been natural if he had not spoken of it at all, and yet it must be a recital full of pain for her, since there was in it no mention of what she had been to him. She had passed out of his life with those long years. So Leslie took the best way, when he assumed that it was something in which she must be interested, and which yet was as far from her present life and its emotions as if it had happened in another century. So it undoubtedly was ; her life had become another thing from that stormy, rebellious existence of many years ago, and she was satisfied with it, as well, she thought sometimes, as one



can be in a world where it is not promised that we "shall be satisfied." Yet she was glad that the pitiless fact had been told her so gracefully, and the bond between her and Leslie became a stronger one, though it would never be a perfect friendship; there was too much, on both sides, to remember. Thus Owen felt positively that since he had not told everything there was to tell in the first place, it was not for him to disturb the present peace by hint or suggestion. The secret of Owen's success with women, of which he had a great deal, lay not so much in his distinct personal charm, which nevertheless was peculiarly decided, but in this perception of the length and breadth and depth of their relations. He appreciated to the least detail the precise value of what he did and said or looked from the varying standpoints of the many women of whom he cared to



make more than acquaintances. He never went beyond or failed to fill the position which each one accorded to him or wished to accord to him. The fact that in the one-sided view of one or more of the same women, these positions had occasionally encroached upon each other, he did not allow to disturb him. She who interested him at the time was the one that he could not permit himself to disappoint.

Antoinette Swift was one of the very few women whom he was willing to concede interesting, with whom he failed to establish these relations. She eluded him, notwithstanding the impression, that he could not dismiss, that they might find each other unusually sympathetic in directions. Apparently she did not share even this modified form of attraction. She almost irritated him on occasions, not because she was indifferent, but because



being, he could not help seeing, perceptive, she somehow failed to perceive him. He felt that, if he saw more of her, he might in time positively dislike her.

But just now what he might feel toward her or any other woman was rapidly being lost in the absorbing interest of his feeling for Altamera. He did not seek to disguise the fact that he was in love with her. He thought her unapproachable in her lovely, indolent grace, set apart by her sweet ignorance of what makes the turbulence of nineteenth century life. He called her Hebe, and Priscilla, and Perdita. He developed a remarkable talent for graceful parallel. He grew fanciful as he remembered the yellow jessamine, the sweet fresh brightness, which he had borne away from the murkiness of Embree station. Neither was this consciousness shadowed by any thought of disloyalty to the dead. He



knew that if this girl would give herself to him, it would be the thing of all others that Robert would have wished. Owen had begun by being jealous for Robert ; it seemed to him now that he might have to be jealous of him. It needed no special insight to know why he had loved her. Robert Morton was in the nature of things even more susceptible to the unconsciousness and innocence of this girl than he was himself. And he was glad that Robert had left so much for him to teach her, for that her love had been an ignorant, childish thing too, he did not doubt.

They met one afternoon at a crowded tea. It was some time before Owen found her. She was seated on a low *causeuse*, talking with one of the fugitive young men to be found at afternoon entertainments. He was a younger man than Leslie, and slightly fearing him as an awfully clever



sort of fellow, acknowledged his superior claims by readily yielding his place.

"Fine tact young Miles has," commented Owen. "I shall make it my affair that he succeeds in life."

"Can you make him succeed?" asked Altamera, with easily awakened faith.

"Nothing more simple," responded Leslie. "It only needs an influential person like myself to mention him to a few people, and distinction is open to him. This confiding world, you know, is always holding out welcoming hands and listening to hear a good word about somebody. True merit backed by a testimonial of good character can win its way anywhere."

Altamera smiled sweetly without heeding the transparent cynicism of his statement.

"He said you were right smart," she remarked.

"And did you need to be told that?"



Owen asked. "But I am glad I spoke the world so fair, since it is beginning through the medium of young Miles to do me justice. So you were talking of me," he went on.

"Oh, yes," said Altamera, "I often talk about you."

This was delicious. Owen glanced around the room at Antoinette Swift. With what intention she would have said a thing like that! It would have been accompanied by an inscrutable glance which defied and allured by its mystery. Altamera said it with the indifference of a child. Antoinette was holding a cup of tea in her gloved fingers, as she looked up at and talked with three men in front of her. Evidently she was relating some narrative made up of absurdities, for they were laughing, while she was serious. Her black velvet dress suited the clear colorless-



ness of her skin, and its heaviness the curves of her figure.

"I was not frightened. I was not surprised," she was saying, her low voice reaching Owen's ears, during one of those hushes that occasionally fall across a hurricane of conversation. "I was simply annihilated—at least I should have believed I was if I had not gasped for breath. Annihilation does not, I fancy, admit of even gasping."

He caught nothing further, but he saw her sigh hopelessly and stir her tea. Then she looked up and across the room and met Owen's eyes, and bowed to him gravely. He acknowledged the recognition, and turned immediately to Altamera. He was annoyed that Antoinette should have found him watching her. He was tired of unfathomable eyes. He was weary of the inscrutabilities.



"Let us get out of this," he said, with that courteous gratitude for the hospitality extended to us, which is the outcome of overcrowded entertainments.

"There is Cousin Lena," said Altamera, rising. "I reckon she's had enough party too. Haven't you, Cousin Lena?"

"I have had all of this that I have time for," answered Miss George. "Oh, you are here, Leslie. I am going, for I have another engagement, and as Altamera wishes to walk home, suppose you walk with her and come in and have dinner with us."

A few minutes later Altamera and Leslie were walking up the avenue. It had been a cloudy day, and the darkness had come early. There was a small moon, looking too inexperienced to be out alone on such a night, wandering down the western sky. Between it and the greenish glow nearer



the horizon, which they caught now and then through the open spaces of the streets, lay a bank of slate-gray cloud. The cold damp was invigorating after the heated room. The touch of Altamera's hand on Owen's arm was like the breath of spring. It thrilled him with suggestions of sentiment.

"Jove!" he said to himself, with the surprise of this scoffing generation, "I thought I was by this sort of thing. I feel as idyllic as if we had been to singing school, and I was 'seeing Nellie home.'"

After dinner Altamera and Owen were left alone in the library. Mr. George went to the club, and Lena must write a report to be ready for the meeting of a society the next morning.

"We have done nothing this year," she said, as she gathered up some books and papers from a table at her side; "nothing,



that is, that tends directly toward the object of the association as laid down in the constitution, but it would not do to let this be known. Under these circumstances a heavy responsibility devolves upon me as secretary. I have not only to show what has been done, but why and how it was done. In fact, it necessitates a complete work of fiction, written with taste and discrimination."

"You've been secretary of things so much," said Owen, as he idly noted Altamera's complete absorption in a pencil sketch that hung just above her, "I should think it was about time to get out an edition of your complete works."

"I'm afraid my style is full of mannerisms," said Miss George, rising, and standing, tall and distinguished looking, under the gas-jets of the chandelier. "I'm hampered by being continually obliged



to refer to unwritten minutes. But I must leave you, to work up the material for this one. I've been noting down through the week ideas that seemed to me to bear more or less directly on the subject."

Lena George had seemed to Owen more like her old self this evening than he had seen her in years. She was more the brilliant, imperious, fascinating Lena George that Robert Morton had fallen in love with, than the self-reliant, incisive, indifferent woman her friends had known of late. Possibly Altamera felt something of this. She had not listened to what they were saying. She seldom listened unless she were directly addressed. But she turned from the picture and watched Lena with her sweet, idle smile as she passed out of the room.

"Come back soon," said Owen as he



held the door open for her. "Simplify the plot and cut them off in the details. Let them work harder next year, if they want more of a story."

Then he came back and seated himself by Altamera on the deep, luxurious sofa that had been drawn up in front of the open fire. The pulsing firelight wavered over her hair, gave more color to her cheeks, and intensified the brightness of her eyes. One small, arched foot just reached and rested on the fender.

As Owen leaned forward and looked smiling into her eyes, for the first time there dawned there a consciousness that was new, and, in his present mood, intoxicating.

She looked away from him, into the flame, and although her lips still smiled calmly, her color deepened swiftly, and she did not speak. To a man of Owen's sensi-



bilities there was a delight in that rare blush and the consciousness of her veiled eyes that a less delicately observing or more single-minded man might have missed. It was enough for the present.

"I had a note from Dr. Fenn to-day," he said. He felt a perverse impulse to go back to that scene with her other lover. The half-averted head turned instantly toward him; the veiling eyelids were raised, revealing no longer any trace of shy emotion, but instead a sudden, almost startled curiosity. It was one of the changes that were so fascinating. It was as if a hand had passed over her and she was another person.

"Dr. Fenn?" she said incredulously.

Leslie might have been surprised in his turn, but he was so charmed by the sudden change that he did not question its cause. He had given up trying to analyze



Altamera as he analyzed other women, he found contentment in observation.

"Why, yes," he answered. "I've mentioned him several times. The doctor that took such good care of Robert Morton, you know."

"Oh, was that his name? I reckon you never mentioned his name before."

"Have I not? That is odd too." He had forgotten what Morton had intimated, about Altamera being known to Dr. Fenn. There had been so much else to think of.

"And he took care of him, did he?" asked Altamera, leaning back in her former indolent attitude, her eyes fixed on the flames.

"Yes, the best of care, I'm sure. He is a fine fellow, if I know anything about men. He was a Georgian too," he added with sudden recollection. "I remember



Robert said that he knew of you in some way. Was he a friend of yours?"

Owen was not thinking much of what he was asking or of what she might answer. He was thinking that she had a pretty ear, and how tantalizingly sweet was the curve of her cheek and chin!

"The face of her, the eyes of her,  
The lips and little chin, the stir  
Of shadow 'round her mouth—"

He almost said it aloud.

"I used to know a Dr. Fenn," she replied, with what might have seemed hesitation except that her drawling intonation was always slow. "But I didn't think he ever knew Robert. I don't believe it is the same one."

"I'm sure Robert thought it was the same one," said Owen, with careless persistence. He would not have been so careless but that that time seemed so long ago.



"Well," and she moved her head a little impatiently as if to dismiss the subject. Then turning her blue eyes toward Leslie and meeting his gaze, she said :

"But all that seems so long ago—so very long ago. It seems as if I couldn't remember it."

It was the echo of his thought. Surely the past was over for them both. He laid his hand on hers and drew her toward him.

"And to me," he said swiftly and passionately, "it is so long ago that it was before the beginning of things. There is so little for me to remember, darling, before I loved you."

She had flushed crimson at his first words, and as he paused an instant she did not speak, but she made no resistance as he drew her head to his shoulder. He could no longer see her eyes, as he looked



down at her, the fair hair pushed back from the low, white forehead, the eye-lashes resting on her babyish cheek. Then he stooped and kissed her lips.

"I love you, Altamera," he said passionately. "Do you hear me, sweet? I love you."

"I expect you do," she said. She spoke still with lowered eyelids. Owen laughed aloud, and stooping, kissed her again.

"And you?" he questioned. "Will you put all the past behind you, dear, except a tender memory? Will you begin where I have begun, and let me love you?"

Tenderness and passion were no obstacles to Leslie's gift of expression. They did not overwhelm his speech by their strength; they guided it into deeper channels.

"Well," answered Altamera calmly, "I reckon you wouldn't have kissed me if I



hadn't been willing to be your sweetheart."

Then for the first time she raised her eyes, and Owen looked closely into their varying lights and shadows.

"Alta, sweet," said he suddenly, "you love me?"

"Oh, yes," said she, undisturbed by his scrutiny, the firelight flickering on her blue dress and the indolent little hands lying folded in her lap; "I love you."

Owen felt no jealousy of the past.



## CHAPTER VI.

Be hard on Love—laid there?

—*St Martin's Summer.*

Peradventure this is not fortune's work neither, but  
Nature's.

—*As You Like It.*

MISS GEORGE did not appear again before Owen left the house. He waited until late for the sake of seeing her—so he told himself and assured Altamera, who proved herself as fascinating in the new phase of their relationship as she had done in the earlier and more distant ones. Owen went away with the conviction that he had begun a chapter which held deliciously fresh and sweet relations, with no teasing uncertainties of plot and evasion of realities.



Altamera sat where he had left her for a few moments. The wood fire was dying out; without its flickering shadows the room seemed cold and empty, and the gas-light added only glitter. She closed her eyes a moment, and dreamed of the warm Southern air and the scented nights, and the loneliness.

“I believe I’ll make Leslie take me down there and make love to me,” she said half aloud, and added smiling, “I reckon there isn’t anybody can do it better.”

Then she rose, and passing into the broad hall went dreamily up the staircase, her soft dress clinging to the balustrade as she swept slowly by, her hand slipping carelessly over its polished surface, her thoughts—not there, but whether in the room she had just left or further away, amid different conditions, it would be hard for those who knew Altamera best to say.



As she opened the door of her room, she paused a moment, startled, before, closing it behind her, she took a step forward.

"Cousin Lena," she said.

The room was dark except for the oblique ray that fell from the street electric light, through the uncurtained window directly opposite her. Against this window was outlined a woman's profile, as, her cheek resting on the cold pane, she looked down into the deserted street. Apparently she had not heard the closing of the door, for, her hands folded in her lap, she was absolutely quiet until Altamera spoke. At the sound of her cousin's voice, she started.

"Well," she said, "I have been waiting for you."

A great change from the gay tones with which she had left them early in the evening was in her voice. Evidently any emo-



tion that might have been in it was rigidly repressed. Altamera did not speak again; she stood quietly where she was and waited. Lena went swiftly across the room and turned up the gas, until then a scarcely distinguishable spark. The sudden change from darkness to light made Altamera cover her eyes an instant, before she could see. Lena went to the window and closed the shutters, without a word. As she turned, Altamera saw that she held a photograph in her hand. Going close to her and holding the picture so that she could see the face, Miss George asked, still in the same emotionless voice :

“Where did you get this photograph, Altamera?”

Altamera looked up smiling into the face of the older woman.

“Why, he gave it to me,” she answered. “Robert Morton, you know.”



"Yes, I know. Why did he give it to you?"

"He gave it to me because we were engaged to be married, Cousin Lena."

Lena turned abruptly away and threw herself down in an arm-chair which stood near. Her brain had been busy with surmises for the past hour; now that one of the wildest of them had become a certainty, she felt dizzy. Altamera moved for the first time, and seating herself not far from her, waited for her to speak again, looking fearlessly and sweetly into her pale face, with its contracted brow.

"I do not know why I should be surprised," said Miss George at last, bitterly. "He was never mine, or he would not have gone away. Men are certain to love again and yet again—they leave it to women to be faithful to a memory. Pshaw! what platitudes I am talking," she exclaimed in



a different tone, as she rose impatiently and crossed the room. She glanced about her as she did so, with an odd realization of the pretty peacefulness of the scene, the dainty curtains, the sparkling toilette articles, near the shining mirror which reflected her own figure and Altamera's. She remembered at the theater the other evening having a similar impression of incongruity during a stormy scene of love and jealousy which took place in a conventional parlor. She had said then that they should have changed the setting. But she had been wrong; the setting was apt to be conventional, and there was the audience—looking on from the outside. Her bitterness did not pass away.

“And yet I am surprised,” she went on, “and it is hard for me. I think because he is dead I have fancied he belonged to me still. I ought to have known that Death



never comes in time to save us our illusions."

She stood silent a moment before Altamera, looking down at her.

"But that it should have been you that he loved," she exclaimed.

"I expect it does seem funny," said Altamera readily.

"That it should be you, who know so little of what is in life, who are so profoundly ignorant of things that I have learned, that it should be you who took him away from me. We do well to talk of the irony of fate."

Altamera did not speak. She felt that there was nothing here for her to answer.

"Did you know that I too had been engaged to Robert Morton—that he loved my voice, my eyes, everything I touched, before he ever met or dreamed of you—



of Altamera Clayton?" demanded Miss George.

If she had thought to strike a spark of resentment to match her own still flame of emotion, she was mistaken.

"Oh, yes, I knew it, Cousin Lena," Altamera answered as if the question had been couched in most commonplace form.

"And why have I not learned before that you knew it?"

"Well, you know, Cousin Lena," replied Altamera, her slow articulation doubly marked in contrast to the other's imperious tones; "it didn't seem to me it would do any particular good to tell you. I'm almost sorry you know it now," she added frankly.

Lena turned away and went back to her chair again. The tempest was strong within her, but there was no fighting against



the calmness of Altamera's diagnosis. In a moment Altamera spoke again :

"Mr. Owen said I'd better tell you."

"Leslie Owen? Does he know it, too? Is he to know everything that concerns my dearest interests before I know it myself?" It was the bitterness of past years as well, that made itself heard now. "Have I been fooled on all sides?"

"Well, I don't believe any one else knows," said Altamera easily. "And Mr. Owen would know because he was with Robert when he died."

"And were not you?" Lena's voice was sharp in its intensity.

"Oh, no, honey, I wasn't. I never saw Mr. Owen before I came North."

Lena caught a quick breath of relief at this assurance. For the moment she had suspected Leslie of concealing so much from her. She could hardly have borne



that this girl should have been there at the last, asserting those rights which had once been hers.

She rose wearily.

“I do not think you did right, Altamera, not to tell me.” For some reason or other her resentment on this score seemed to have spent itself. “But how should you have known? I suppose you thought it best to let sleeping dogs lie,” and she smiled a little. “It is a hard thing for a woman to learn any time that what has been for her a revolution has been little more than a mock fight for somebody else. Perhaps I am growing a little bombastic,” and she paused an instant, and then went on:

“But this is what it is. It is a hard thing for me to know that Robert Morton took back what he gave to Lena George, to give again to her little cousin Altamera



Clayton. I suppose he told you that he never really loved me?" she said swiftly.

"No, he never told me that."

"No," repeated Lena more quietly, "he would not have said that. It would not have been true."

There was a moment's pause, and Lena crossed the room toward the door.

"Good-night," she said.

"Wait a minute, Cousin Lena," said Altamera; "I think if you listen to me you won't feel so badly."

Lena waited, one hand resting on the door.

"I reckon Robert always cared most about you."

If Altamera had shown the slightest aspect of administering consolation, it would have been for Miss George the last unbearable sting. But it was entirely evident that she was saying only what she



thought with a genuine wish to be fair to everybody, and her words brought a sudden lifting of Lena's heart.

"He loved me," she went on. "He did everything for me. I reckon he felt as if he couldn't get along down there without me. But he used to talk about you as if you were something different. As if," Altamera said sweetly, "you had done something for him no one else could ever do, and as if his life up here had been what it couldn't ever be again."

The charmer charming never so wisely could not have reached Lena George as did Altamera's almost smiling assurance. She came back into the room.

"I am glad," she said softly; "yes, I am glad."

At first she had thought only of Robert and herself; now it struck her how singularly gracious was this girl's resignation of



so much right in the man who had been her lover as well.

"And it is all over, now," went on Altamera,— "all over for both of us, Cousin Lena."

"Yes," assented Lena absently, "it is over now."

Then something in Altamera's tone drew her attention and she asked:

"But why now, Altamera, any more than a year ago?"

"Because," answered Altamera, with her undisturbed directness, "I am engaged to Mr. Leslie Owen."

Miss George started. A wave of emotion which she did not understand overflowed her. It was a new surprise, and she did not know yet where it carried her. She leaned over Altamera and kissed her.

"Forgive me," she said. "I am afraid I have been hard."



"Oh, no, you haven't been hard," said Altamera, smiling.

"Leslie Owen"—it was difficult for Miss George to speak, more difficult than it had been yet—"Leslie Owen knows how to make a woman happy, and I trust he will make you so," she said. "Good-night."

"She has given him back to me. She has given him back to me!" Lena said it again and again to herself as she went to her room. "I forgive her everything."

She knew now that it was joy that had so thrilled her, when Altamera spoke.

"He is no longer hers, now that she is Leslie's. Oh, Robert, 'it all comes to the same thing in the end,

Since mine thou wast, mine art, and mine shall be,  
Faithful or faithless ;—thou must come  
Back to the heart's place here I keep for thee !'"

The next morning she saw Leslie.



"It is an absurd complication," she said, "all that I feel about the matter. I am glad for you—I can be that unconditionally. And yet—no, there shall be no reservations. I am glad unconditionally. And I am glad for Altamera—I think you will make her happy." She felt how conventional was this phrase she had used twice over—yet what else was there to wish for?

"Altamera provides happiness for me, and finds herself," said Leslie smiling.

Owen's eyes were exultant this morning.

"All the world loves me, I am a lover," he had said as he entered. "Miss George, I call upon you, too. 'My love is like a red, red rose,' and all the rest. I know them all this morning. I am not sure that I could not sing a roundelay, if I was pressed."

Then he had stopped, for he had seen



that something more than his engagement was in Miss George's mind. Since then they had been all over it.

"Yes," said Lena, in answer to his last words, "she is a person of great contentment." She paused a moment, and then went on: "And yet I am a little resentful too—resentful for Robert."

"You would not have such a child as Altamera resign everything for the sake of a memory, surely?" said Owen.

"No, it is not for a memory of the dead that we resign everything, I think. It is for a memory of the living," said Miss George, smiling a little sadly. "And certainly I would not have Altamera forego anything. Indeed I am very glad, for now—I am so very foolish to care for this—I need not always associate her with Robert. You see how selfish I am—to look at it so from my own side. I feel as



if I had a justification in my selfishness, for I have been kept so—out of it.”

Her voice quivered an instant with reproach as she said the last words.

“Perhaps we have deserved the rebuke,” said Owen, “but it has not been because we were indifferent,” and he raised her hand to his lips. She was singularly winning in this softened mood, so unusual a one. He felt that he must express his sympathy by a caress. He had never felt before that caresses could be acceptable to Lena George.

It was later in the day that Lena said to her cousin :

“You know you told me to go to your desk, Altamera, for that letter I asked for.”

“Yes,” answered Altamera carelessly. She was playing with some roses Owen had sent her, burying her face in their



sweetness, drawing them lightly across her cheeks and lips.

"It was in that way I found Robert's photograph."

"Yes, honey, that's all right," said Altamera.

"I think it was mighty nice of Leslie to send me these roses, Cousin Lena," she went on. "I'm going to give you some to wear."

So the matter was dismissed for all time.

As a spectacle, Altamera's and Owen's engagement proved an entire success. The most ill-natured could only say that Miss George had managed matters well. After it had become known as an accomplished fact, and people had made up their minds whether or not it had surprised them, it provoked very little comment of any sort. It was recognized as manifestly unobjectionable.



"Do you know, Mr. Owen," said Antoinette Swift one evening, "I am not sure that you are not quite an ideal lover."

He had taken her out to dinner, and she spoke in the midst of that buzz of conversation that made all but one's next neighbor almost inaudible.

Owen had felt his slight hostility to Miss Swift somewhat disarmed of late. She was very fond of Altamera, and he had seen them together several times.

He turned to her now with a smile.

"Is that because you have caught me overtly looking at Altamera?" he asked. "I acknowledge it without evasion. But in extenuation I would add that you have devoted yourself to the gentleman on your other side for precisely five minutes."

"It was longer than that, I think," observed Miss Swift. "I intended it to be long enough to make you miss me."



"I did miss you, and then, naturally, my eyes turned toward Altamera, like a load-stone and the star, and that sort of thing."

"Because you are always missing her, I suppose."

"Because she would not have so basely deserted me. She does not care for stout elderly gentlemen so much as she does for me."

"I do," said Miss Swift, "I am devoted to them. I only hope you will live to be one yourself. You will, if you are good enough."

"And then will you be devoted to me?" he asked, not unnaturally.

"Unless I have changed with years," she replied serenely. "But I do not think you will be even then any nearer the ideal type than you are now—but this is a digression regarding my personal taste.



I am regarding you now as a type in the present."

"It is something to be ideal at any time of life," Owen said thankfully.

"It is a good deal. I have observed you with Altamera, and you anticipate her every wish, as they say in the story-books. I have seen you—not so often—without Altamera, and you make a very creditable showing. It strikes me that you are worthy of imitation."

"I can procure a number of the same kind, I am afraid," said Owen.

"I have already told you," she said quietly, "that you are too young and too slender."

"Yes, Mr. Stewart?" she went on to her left-hand neighbor, who had just then addressed her, "I have read it. I was much interested, too. But it seemed to me that the hero was such a prey to his own self-consciousness."



"Quite true. Quite true," assented Mr. Stewart.

"One wanted to put a bright object on a stick and say, 'Look at this,' as they do at the photographer's, you know—while the author takes his picture."

"Ha, ha! Very good. Very good indeed, Miss Swift. Capital criticism."

"Was that clever?" asked Miss Swift sweetly. "It must be if you find it so, Mr. Stewart. But applause discomfits me. I always begin to think I must have read it somewhere."

Owen did not look at Altamera this time. He began to think that Mr. Stewart had much better devote himself to the lady he had taken out.

"I understood," he found occasion to remark with some emphasis, "that Mrs. Sloane seated me by you that I might be entertained. I have reason to believe that



she gave Miss Riding to Mr. Stewart that he might not be entertained—that is, too much. Why interfere with the designs of your hostess and neglect me at the same time?”

“Why, have I not been entertaining you?” asked Miss Swift, with soft surprise. “Even those last remarks of mine were intended to be heard by you too. My conversation with Mr. Stewart is of the sort for one or more, you know.”

“I want something more than oblique attention,” said Owen. He was beginning to feel a little of his former irritation. Miss Swift’s indifference was so evident. It made him feel doubly exacting.

“Yes,” she said “it is easy to see that. You care only for the very special.” She spoke carelessly, but her eyes met his and seemed to imply—what was it they implied? It was only for an instant that he



could have read anything there. The next she was saying :

“I think the other dishes of salted almonds really hold more, don't you? It can not be that I have eaten so many.”

A dinner was just the form of entertainment that suited Antoinette Swift. A certain precision of detail, an elegance of appointment that belong to a well-ordered dinner were the sort of thing adapted to her, and there was about her a daintiness, an apparent and deceptive simplicity, a sparkle and cut-glass lustre, that seemed particularly appropriate. So thought Owen as he observed her this evening. Again he looked across the table at Altamera, who was leaning back in her chair and listening to her companion. Evidently she was not much interested. How graceful she was ! After all, an *al fresco* entertainment was a fitter setting for her, to



carry out his idea of appropriateness. Yet his next neighbor would not be amiss—in the forest of Arden, for instance. The conventional velvet cap of Rosalind would suit her very well. Just then Altamera looked at him and smiled. He wished he could go over to her and take her away from all these people, and spend by her side one of those moonlight evenings he remembered in Florida, warm and filled with the scent of orange-blossoms. That would be an *al fresco* entertainment worth enjoying,



## CHAPTER VII.

There is occasions and causes why and wherefore in all things.

—*King Henry V.*

Who made things plain in vain ?

What was the sea for ?

—*D's Aliter Visum.*

WINTER went slowly by, lingering as late as he dared, so loth is this enemy of mankind to admit of rational, innocent pleasure. Spring, who has learned so many of Winter's worst tricks and has originated a number of pestering aggravations of her own, had also taken her unwilling departure. Even May, which once it was the fashion much to praise, was allowed to go with no urging for a longer stay. May, when Corinna, if her mother be unwise enough to let her go Maying at all, must go in rubber overshoes



and carrying a blanket shawl ; May, who, with unprincipled license, takes advantage of all the sunny associations that twine about her name, of all the pleasant things poets have said about her in happier climes, to decoy us, of New England neighborhood, into indiscreet dreams, and practices which she promptly visits with disappointment and ridicule—May had given place to June. And June is no gay deceiver like the rest of them, even in New England and parts of the Middle States. She lacks the remorseless hardihood to introduce “areas” of light snow when you are out looking for rosebuds. She is not unwilling to let men see that sunshine, warm and glowing, long days, throbbing with heat and light and perfume, blue skies and green trees are nice things in their way.

It was toward the last of June that Miss George and Altamera left the city. Owen



was not to join them until a month later, when they were all to meet at Britton, a place on the sea-coast, which yet was not denuded of the charms of the country. There they could have the blue water before them all day and nevertheless could turn aside into green, shaded fields or a tract of fragrant pine woods. The days dragged for Owen through July. He told himself more than once that man was not made for burning pavements and crowded streets and ceaseless throng and bustle. That it was only with Nature that one reached intellectual and moral, as well as physical, development. In fact he spent a good deal of time ringing changes on the text of God's having made the country, and men the town, and meanwhile read Altamera's letters. She did not write many; letter writing was not a distinct pleasure to her, and though Leslie was now and then in-



clined to find fault with the lapses of time between their arrivals, he felt that he approved of it.

“It was refreshing to find a woman,” he said to himself, “who did not enjoy putting her emotions on paper.”

He had kept the letter she had written him in answer to the first he had addressed to her, and he read it once in a while with renewed sentiment. With a revelation of that weird power which is capable of prophesying after the event, he felt that he had foreseen their present relations from the first.

Britton is not yet a very fashionable place. There is no large hotel whose advertisements have widely disseminated knowledge concerning the attractions of its situation.

The cottage which Mr. George had taken for his daughter was somewhat separated



from the others. From its front windows and doorways there was little to be seen but the sea, "weltering away," as Mr. Howells says, "unnecessarily vast." From the western piazza could be beheld the full glories of the sinking sun, and a line of low wooded hills, a screen behind which it might make its exit with proper stage effect. It was on this piazza that Miss George and Altamera were sitting to-night. The sky was flooded with color, burnished gold and waving red changing just above them to pale, luminous green, cool and quiet. Behind them, already high in the eastern heavens, the moon, nearly full, scarcely yet to be distinguished from the blue behind it, gazed upon the scene, with that placid, somewhat expressionless calm with which she is wont to view the brilliance of departing day. When all this flaming excitement is over, the world will be glad



enough of her illumination. Till then, with the indifference of superiority, she foregoes participation. Altamera, with her hands clasped over her head, half reclined in a long, low chair, her eyes fixed on the sunset. Miss George, her book closed in her lap, leaned forward on the rail, breathing in the beauty. Both were silent and very still, though the sea-breeze now and then ruffled Miss George's hair and blew Altamera's short locks back from her forehead. At last Miss George turned her head and looked curiously at her companion.

"That child looks as if the soul of the sunset had gone into her eyes," she thought. "I wonder how much of it has. I doubt if I ever find out."

"Alta!" she said aloud.

Altamera turned her head also, but not toward Miss George. Instead she looked



past her, to the end of the piazza. A step could be heard on the pebbles ; it had not yet reached the path to the house. Miss George did not hear it, but Altamera listened a moment, then settled her head back again in its former comfortable position, and answered :

“ What is it, Cousin Lena ? ”

“ What does it make you think of—an evening like this ? ”

“ Well,” said Altamera, smiling. “ It makes me think of what it is, as much as it does of anything. But I reckon I don’t think about things, like you do, Cousin Lena. It is enough for me to see them. I like that.”

“ And it is enough for anybody,” said Lena, with a little sigh. “ It is—only—why, Leslie,” and she rose to greet Owen as he came around the corner of the piazza.



"Yes, I had to come a week earlier," he said, as he took her hand.

"I'm mighty glad to see you, Leslie," said Altamera in her soft, rich voice as he bent over her. "I heard you coming along the sand."

"And why didn't you say so?" exclaimed Lena.

"Oh, I reckoned you'd see him soon enough," said Altamera, laying her cheek caressingly against Leslie's coat-sleeve as he stood, his arm resting on her chair.

"I'm always soon enough for Altamera, I'm afraid," said Owen, laughing, and looking down into her eyes.

"Well, I thought the first of August was getting to be a good way off," she answered tranquilly. Thus began Owen's visit. After this came the long, dreamy August days, and to-day was like yesterday and to-morrow would be like to-day, and



sun and wind and sea were averse to changes, and it was only now and then that one said to himself, "It is only for a little while."

Owen said it when he came in one evening with Altamera from drifting about in the moonlight, and found a fire in the parlor and Altamera was glad to sit down on the rug close to the fender.

Antoinette Swift said it when she picked the first golden-rod and tucked it into the belt of her dark-blue boating suit.

It was about the last of August when Antoinette came to Britton. She visited Mrs. Gerard Mason, whose cottage was the nearest to the old pier on the point and the farthest away from Miss George's. Owen did not know that she was there for several days after her arrival. Then he met her with half a dozen other people, walking along a dusty road, on his way to post



some letters. It was then that as he joined the party for a quarter of a mile of the way, she had picked the golden-rod and said :

“It is only for a little while,” with a half-suppressed sigh of regret.

The sigh and the regret were evidently intended chiefly for the man on the other side of her, though she gracefully included Owen in the sentiment. Owen somewhat impatiently felt that there was always a man on the other side of her. He objected to this one the more that he proved himself thoroughly equal to the occasion. His name was Murray; he was a man of forty, tall, with well-set head and shoulders, entire ease of manner, and evidently capable of inspiring regard.

“One of the most charming things about you, Antoinette,” he now observed, “is your regret. Because we all know you



really incapable of it,—you leave that to the rest of us.”

“Oh, as for you, we all know you are a skeptic,” rejoined Miss Swift, “and consequently do not believe there is anything worth regretting. But, Mr. Owen, and I,” and she looked up at him gravely, “we know what it is to believe. I know Mr. Owen is sorry that all this—” and she waved her hand comprehensively, “is only for a little while.”

Owen had been wondering what the deuce this Murray called her Antoinette for.

“Yes,” he answered, “I am sorry, but having been so long the sport of change, I have begun to believe that a tender melancholy enhances everything.”

“Oh, no!” said Antoinette, with a slight emphasis, “not everything.”

He was not at all sure what she had



meant by this, even when he had reached home—and had thought about it a good deal.

“Miss Swift is here, Altamera,” he said as she met him at the door, “and she wants you to come to see her.”

“I have been to see her this afternoon,” said Altamera, “and she wasn’t at home.”

“So you knew she was here? Why didn’t you ask me to go with you?”

“Oh, I reckon you don’t like Antoinette right well,” answered Altamera calmly.

“I have no time to like anybody ‘right well’ but you, sweetheart,” said Leslie.

But it was before Antoinette came, after all, that Britton saw its fairest days. Long days they were, and evenings when it was never cold, when they sat on the sand or in the shade of the rocks, or sailed about in the harbor, and took no thought for the morrow what they should eat or what they



should drink, or wherewithal they should be clothed.

Altamera was very fond of sailing, and she handled a boat capitally. She had learned during that one season she had spent away from Embree, when her uncle had taken her, with his own children, to the Gulf. Owen would lie luxuriously in the bow of the boat enjoying the graceful strength with which she managed the little sail, fully alive to all the pretty curves and alertnesses which were a part of his skipper. He did most of the talking that was done at all. Occasionally he would recite, for her benefit, his favorite poems, sometimes he would take a book and read snatches aloud, and Altamera would listen and smile and interrupt him in the middle of a sentence or a stanza, to bid him look at the people in that boat, or to spell out the name of a yacht. It was impossible



to be resentful, but one day when she had imperiously directed his attention to some porpoises as he was repeating Matthew Arnold's lines to "Memory," he observed lazily:

"Altamera, I wonder if after we have been married years, a great many years, you understand, I should not be tempted to repine if you interrupted me in the midst of Matthew Arnold to say that you thought the windows needed washing."

Altamera laughed.

"I expect you would," she said. Then she looked wisely about her, and added, "There is hardly any wind, we may as well drift," and the sail fell idly against the mast.

The sea was like glass; here and there only was a little roughening of the surface as a whiff of air touched it and was gone. Little boats were scattered about, almost



motionless, like themselves. The sun was low in the west, and there was a warm, pink light over sky, land, and water. The air was clear, and the houses on the shore stood sharp and distinct against the sky. Altamera, her hand still grasping a rope, her head turned toward the shore, was still as if carven, as the boat made its way slowly in.

“This is delicious,” said Owen softly. “What are you, Altamera? Are you Faith or Hope, nearing the celestial shores, guiding me out of the shadows of unbelief into the rainbow colors of happiness? Or are you a fair Destiny leading me to Realization?”

He paused a moment; the boat scarcely seemed to stir; Altamera moved the tiller and did not answer.

“Or perhaps you are Undine who is rescuing the man who loves her from the



dangers of the deep—a salt-water Undine, you know. Or a spirit from a fairer clime, tempting the waters of this, on a voyage of discovery? Look around you, fair spirit, and tell me really if your own clime is fairer, after all, than ours?”

“Thus adjured,” Altamera turned and, glancing from the lazily smiling passenger to calmly brooding Nature, swept the horizon in a comprehensive gaze.

“Yes,” she said, occupying herself with the tiller, “it’s been a pretty day.”

“A very pretty day,” repeated Leslie absently. Now and then he felt distinctly disappointed that Altamera had no imagination.

“You are Destiny,” he added, as the boat swung to her moorings.

He had no thought of regret that she was Destiny, he was far too much in love with her for that. He only had to listen



to her delicious voice a few moments, to the "vowels turned caressingly between the consonants," to know how fully he was under the charm.

Only, the next afternoon when she had sent him out to walk alone, for she never would walk any distance, and he found Antoinette Swift sitting alone in the shade of some rocks, he wished Altamera had a little of her sympathetic perception of Nature's and human moods.

It was a gray day. The sky was gray, and the greenish-gray water was turned now and then into whiteness by a damp wind which blew, not steadily, but irrationally and unaccountably. It was a depressing day, one of those when, evade as we may the question of *Cui bono?* it weighs us down with an unrecognized presence.

Miss Swift was reading as Owen came



toward her. Her brows were drawn together a little as if it were something of an effort, but she did not look up until he spoke. Then she started a little ; she had not heard his step on the sand, and Owen fancied that she changed color for an instant. It was the first time he had ever seen Miss Swift's color change for a trifle, and he felt vaguely flattered. She was so apt to ignore him in a way that was not even distinguished.

"I have been trying very hard to read," she said, "but it is not much use. What is the use of trying to do anything such a day as this?"

"May I sit down by you?" asked Leslie.

"Certainly, but I shall not try even to entertain you."

"I am the lion and the fatling together," he said "in the way of being entertained ; a little child may lead me."



Antoinette was unusually pretty this afternoon. She was buttoned up tightly in a close-fitting ulster with a red-lined hood, and wore a little cloth hat with a bird's wing, and a dark velvet rim about her hair, which the wind had disturbed a little from its usual severe simplicity, and the dampness had twisted the short locks into little rings.

"Moreover," Owen went on, "I do not mean to sit here long. I mean to ask you to take a walk with me. You will not mind a little wetting, I am sure, if we are let in for it."

"Not in the least," said Antoinette. "I am prepared for it. I flatter myself I suggest a stormy petrel this afternoon. That is what I have made myself up for. And who ever heard of a stormy petrel minding the weather?"

"Perhaps you will not even think it is of



much use to walk," said Leslie. He had seated himself by her side on the rock.

"Frankly—I do not know that I do," she replied.

"But a great safeguard in life is that where one can not see the good of doing anything one must do something. Even if what people call letting one's self drift, generally means doing something."

"It certainly is found to mean a great deal if one tries to get back to where one started from."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully; "and watch that dreary tide a moment, and see if one should not always give up all one's idea of getting back, if one is going to drift."

"After all, that piece of sea-weed that has finally been dislodged is going to be brought back time and again."



"Yes, but taken away further and further. No, it is not safe to drift."

She turned and looked at him with some scrutiny. "Especially," she added, "if the tide be past the full."

Did she mean anything? Owen wondered; or was she only playing with similes for her own and his amusement?

"And now shall we take our walk?" she asked, before he could answer. "Or have you thought better of inviting me?"

For answer he gave her his hand to help her to rise. The wind was blowing harder and the smell of rain was in the air. She turned her face toward the sea and took a long breath of the salt freshness.

"I think it is a walk that I have been wanting," she said. "Come."

Apparently she had no thought of anything but the weather. Owen had already



forgotten that he was tired of the inscrutabilities.

Leslie had been inclined to be a little impatient with Altamera this afternoon because she would not walk with him. It was so evidently nothing but indolence that kept her in. But he told her he was not sorry after all, since it would only have bored her and he supposed she would be pleased to know that he had met her friend, Miss Swift, and had made some progress toward friendship with her. Altamera was pleased.

"I wish you and she would walk right often," she said. Evidently she was glad to have so easy a remedy for Owen's dissatisfaction.

Leslie told himself, as he told Altamera, that he was not sorry she had not gone. She would have been tired before the end of the first half-mile, and they would have



turned back. But Antoinette walked well and was not easily tired. It was a pleasure to be her companion. It rained a little in a pettish way, before they reached Mrs. Mason's cottage, but Antoinette only laughed at Owen's regret.

"I am so glad we went," she said simply, as they drew near the house. Her color was heightened by the exercise and her eyes were bright.

"And I can not thank you enough," he answered.

"I ran away from all the people at the house," she went on. "I was very tired of them all, and in that mood I fancied they might tire of me—which I could not allow. There is Mr. Murray looking out for me."

In the open doorway, watching them approach, stood, with his hands in his pockets, the man whom Owen had met with Miss Swift that first day.



“Who is Mr. Murray?” he asked. “I think I have not heard you speak of him.”

Owen felt, as soon as he had spoken, how exceedingly weak was this observation. His curiosity about this man who called her Antoinette had been too much for his wisdom. He had never heard Miss Swift speak of any one except their most evidently mutual acquaintances. He spoke as if she had prattled by the hour of all her circle of family and friends. He was grateful to her that she did not seem to perceive his absurdity.

“He is a sort of cousin of mine,” she answered. “We have always known each other and liked each other. He goes about a good deal and is a great favorite of Mrs. Gerard’s.”

“You look pleased to see me home again, Dick,” she said, as they passed in



at the gate. "Confess you have all been bored to death without me."

"There have been two mysterious disappearances on the first floor, besides your own," he answered, "and I am inclined to suspect one or two quiet suicides above stairs. How do you do, Mr. Owen? Coming in, aren't you? No? Mrs. Mason will be sorry."

Antoinette did not ask him to stay. She gave him her hand and said good-by, and went into the house. Murray detained him a few minutes, and then Leslie, declining a repeated invitation from Mrs. Mason, took his way home.



## CHAPTER VIII.

The little less and what worlds away !

—*By the Fireside.*

Speak low if you speak love.

—*Much Ado.*

Two weeks later Miss Swift sat with Richard Murray at the summit of a little wooded knoll, cut off even from the sight of the sea. The ground was clear for a few paces on all sides of them, but sank, before them, into the duskiness of low trees and underbrush, and on each side of them were thick lines of beech and maple. It was late in September and late afternoon, and there was a light haze, imperceptible in the sunlight, which made the hollows in the woods a blue which melted into colorlessness



nearer at hand. The trees had begun to turn yellow, and now and then a leaf fell softly, but audibly in the stillness.

"Antoinette," said Murray.

She started a little, although he spoke quietly. Apparently she had almost forgotten his presence.

"Well," she answered, scraping with her gloved fingers a bit of lichen off the wood of the old rail fence which straggled beside them off into the recesses of the wood in a vain effort to keep up appearances.

"You remember perhaps," he went on, "that I have always told you that I should not ask you but once to marry me. That I had no objection to letting you know in a variety of ways that I was in love with you, but that I should never force you to answer but once."

"Yes," said Antoinette, "I remember



perfectly. And I never could see why you should make such a point of it."

"Because that would necessitate your making a point of it. As long as you felt that you had a weapon in reserve you would refuse to consider any engagement decisive. You are that sort of woman. You are unscrupulous in your employment of advantages."

"It seems to me that I am almost Napoleonic."

It was evident that for some reason or other it was an effort for her to speak lightly. She seemed to dread a little what her companion might say.

"I mean that when you refuse me it shall be because you do not wish to marry me, not because you think you will, perhaps—but some other time."

"You have made the plan of duty plain before my face."



"Don't be flippant," said Murray severely. "I think that the time has come for me to ask you."

"This afternoon?" she asked.

"Yes, this afternoon."

"I think, Dick, it might be safely put off a while longer."

There was little entreaty in her voice.

"And that is just what I do not think." He turned and looked at her now for the first time since he had begun to speak. She had stopped her play with the lichen and was listening quietly, but she was paler than usual.

"You know how long I have been in love with you, Antoinette. I love you now—always. Will you say that you will marry me, or will you send me away?"

He spoke very quietly still. Antoinette was less calm than he. There were tears in her eyes when she asked:



"Oh, Dick, can't we let it stay as it is?"

"What a foolish question, Antoinette."

"Yes, certainly it was foolish," she assented quickly. "I should think I was seventeen. Nothing ever stays as it is, of course."

Neither spoke for several moments. Antoinette was miserably perplexed. This man had always held for her a certain power that belonged to no other. It was in part due to their relationship and their long acquaintance, in part to his cool, determined, genuine personality, and perhaps, more than all, to his very true conception of her character. She liked him and admired him, but could not say to him to-day that she would be his wife. It would be a way out of it all too, she thought, and things were beginning to look more misty than ever before, with intervals of clearness, pitiable clearness. Most men would



have feared that they had chosen their time badly, but Murray knew her better.

It was in just some such revolt from the perplexity of another emotion that he had everything to hope from Antoinette.

“Will you give me a week?” she asked, after that long pause. She made no further effort to combat the necessity for decision.

“Yes,” he said, “I will give you a week. That is much more sensible than your first suggestion.”

“And now it seems to me that we had better go back,” said Antoinette. “It is growing late, and I do not wish to be confronted by the town-crier.”

The blue hollows were growing darker and the white mist was more perceptible over the low-lying fields beyond.

“Wait a moment,” said Murray. “I have another thing to say.”



"I object to having any more greatness thrust upon me this afternoon," said Antoinette hastily.

"I wish to ask if you know what is coming for you and Leslie Owen out of your present relations."

Antoinette's face flamed with indignant color, but she spoke composedly. Murray had always lectured her, and she had always submitted to it. It would not do to let him think that this was a matter so serious that it would not bear touching upon.

"I do not think our present relations will be productive of anything but a few pleasant memories — perhaps," she answered. The color faded before he saw it, and she met his eyes with a glance as calm as his own.

"You have been always, as I have said, unscrupulous in pushing an advantage," he went on, "but there is about you a sort of



native generosity toward other women, which would, I should fancy, prevent you from doing what you are doing now."

This was hitting Antoinette hard.

"I am not ungenerous," she said quickly. "Have I deprived, or attempted to deprive, another woman of one single evidence of devotion that belongs to her?"

"You are changed, if that which is evident is what you consider worth having."

"Her position is precisely what it has always been—she is entirely uninjured."

"If you have stooped to the sophistry of this sort of reasoning," he said indifferently, "I have nothing more to say."

"It would have been as well, if you had said nothing at all."

"That is almost vixenish," he said as he assisted her to rise. "Let me 'pick those burrs off your coat'—or rather frock. I would not be vixenish, if I were you."



When they reached, on their way home, the beginning of the old pier, Antoinette said :

“ Richard, I wish you would go on to the house and leave me here. You have annoyed me and perplexed me, and I am, I think, as you hinted in your delicately veiled intimation, a little out of temper. I would rather stay out of doors until I am in it again.”

“ Very well,” he said quietly, smiling down into her eyes. He rarely smiled, which made such a look of value. “ If you will come in before dark, I will leave you.”

It was with the remembrance of that smile that Antoinette made her way out on the pier.

“ He understands me very well, lamentably well,” she said to herself. Then she paused and leaning back against the massive wall while she stood below on the



hewn rocks, tumbled out of place years before, she forced herself to regain her old composure.

"I am angry," she thought, "I am harassed a little; I am not sure that I am not miserable. And yet what have I done to deserve it all? Oh," and she pushed angrily against the gray stone, "why could not Dick have waited? The summer will so soon be over, and then I shall be myself again. I am always myself when the gas is lighted and there is a roar of carriages going by, and there is an end to these long days and moonlight and the sound of the sea."

The haziness which had been a mist on land was a fast-growing fog on the water. It made the coming dusk more shadowy than ever.

"Antoinette," said a voice not far from her; "so it is you? I saw what I thought



was your figure, but the blurred outlines this evening make everything indistinct."

Owen spoke carelessly, but his eyes, as they rested on her face, said more than his voice. She did not answer him, but watched him silently as he stepped over sharp edges and on rocking stones till he stood a little below her at her side.

"You do not look cheerful," he went on, "but that may not be your fault. A single person looking at the sea never looks cheerful. It was necessary for me to introduce, for spectators, the element of companionship."

"I am not cheerful," she said, "I am quite the reverse," but her voice betrayed nothing of a crisis of emotion. With him she was at home, here in this Debatable Land where they had been walking, where nothing had been said that must be answered, and where they had darkened their



understandings that they need not perceive.

“What has one to do with cheerfulness, nowadays?” speculated Owen. “It is an antiquated mood and belongs to ruffs and farthingales—whatever they may be. In this century one goes from the delirium of happiness to that of wretchedness, or else one is bored—these three moods only are permissible.”

“It is unlike you to yield so much to delirium of any description,” she said.

“It has not been too late for me to learn,” he answered. Something in his voice warned her that here too there was danger of a breaking away of the barriers she was fond of maintaining.

“I must go,” she said. “I came here for only a moment.”

“But you have not told me why you are



not cheerful," he objected, detaining her. "Am I not to know?"

Antoinette felt the risk, but she had trifled with such risks all her life. Besides, there was something, she did not pause to consider what, prompting her to a sort of recklessness. She turned half away from him, as she answered:

"I am facing the future. I would never face the future if I could help it. This time I can not put it aside, nor can I look another way."

Something in her manner or her tone, something in what he knew of the circumstances, more than all, his unfailing intuition, told Owen what was in her mind.

"Antoinette," he said quickly. It was the second time he had called her by her first name this evening, and he had never done so before. It was an index of his



mood. "Antoinette, are you going to marry Richard Murray?"

"You have no right—" she began.

"I have a right," he exclaimed passionately. "I love you."

She flashed toward him, her eyes shining, and her lips parted to say the scornful words that had never failed her. As she met his gaze she stopped, shivered a little, paled, hesitated, and, turning away again, laid her cheek in throbbing misery against the gray rock behind her. In that moment of hesitancy, she recognized that for the first time in her life she had invoked a force that was too strong for her.

In a few moments she spoke without glancing at him.

"Why, why do you tell me that!"

He drew nearer, but did not touch her.

"And why should I not tell you?" he



asked in his low voice, which became so easily caressing. "We knew it, both of us. We wrong no one any further. We neither of us can change anything. Why not say it, and let it go?"

"It is a wrong," she said—"a wrong to Altamera. It never seemed that to me before—before, we were only enjoying what we had a right to enjoy, what Altamera herself could not have blamed—but now—oh, you should not have told me!"

"But nothing is changed," he repeated. "Altamera will never know now any more than she would have known before. I would not have dared tell some women, but you and I are of the sort that may understand each other."

But Antoinette shook her head. She clung to her woman's logic, that that which was unsaid and unacknowledged could not be treachery.



“Oh,” she exclaimed, turning toward him now, “why would you not be warned? I understood you well enough from the first to see the danger. I would have none of you. Do you remember that first walk?—then I told you you should not drift. After that I left it in your hands—yours and Altamera’s. What were you both thinking of?” and she wrung her hands in her impatience.

“I am not sorry,” said Owen sadly but resolutely. “I shall never be sorry. I shall be utterly wretched, but I shall not be sorry.”

“Go, now,” she said. “Go, please. Let us get back to sanity as fast as we can. No, you shall not wait for me. I wish to be alone.”

Half angry with her want of reason, half bitterly sorry that he had hurt her, wholly in love with her, Owen turned away and



went back toward the road along the uneven stone pier. As he reached it, he looked behind; she was following him, her light, firm figure poised unfalteringly, as she made her way over the gray stones. Without a glance in his direction, she followed the path to Mrs. Mason's cottage and disappeared.

Owen went on, passed the house where he was staying, a stone's throw from Miss George's, and entered the one where he knew he should find Altamera. He was sure that his only safety was to put himself under the spell that a few weeks ago had been so potent.

There was no light in the little parlor of the cottage except that of the open fire, before which, on a dark rug of bearskin sat Altamera.

Apparently she had been thinking deeply, for she stretched her arms over



her head in an exhausted little yawn as Owen came in.

“Leslie,” she said, “there’s something I want to ask you about.”

His heart stood still a moment. Did she by some feminine intuition know the whole story of his treachery? It was unlikely, it was impossible, and yet he went forward into the firelight prepared to face the worst. Her first words surprised him.

“Have you heard anything about Dr. Fenn lately?” she asked in her slow, drawling tones.

“Yes—no,” he answered. He hardly knew what he said, he was so relieved and so surprised. “I was able to send him some books a few weeks ago that I happened to know he wanted. After that I heard from him; but as I say, that was some time ago.”



"You never happened to tell him anything about our engagement, did you?" asked Altamera.

"No," said Owen, wondering, "I did not mention it."

"I reckon he's heard about enough about my engagements," said Altamera thoughtfully.

Owen had thrown himself down on the rug beside her, resting his head on his hand, and looking past her into the fire. As she said this, he turned to scrutinize her. She, too, was gazing into the fire. It reminded him of the evening in the library when he had first told her he loved her. The firelight again played over her features, and her little hands, clasped about her knees, were almost scorched, so close was she to the hearth.

"What do you mean, Alta?" he asked.  
"Why?"



“Well,” began Altamera, “I expect I’d better tell you all about it. You see, Adams—that’s his name, Adams Fenn—used to live down near our plantation. He and I used to know each other right well. But he went away to grow up, and I done forgot him, as Kentuck says. After a while he came back, but it was a pretty long while, and I was Robert’s sweetheart then.”

Altamera paused a moment, not, apparently, in any deep emotion, but lost in reminiscence.

“Adams was a right smart doctor then,” she went on. “They all said he was, and I reckon they were about right. He fell in love with me, and took it mighty hard when he found out I was engaged. He was a pretty quiet fellow, but he went round after that like he didn’t care for anything. I reckon our Southern men take these things harder, anyway.”



"That is libel," said Owen. "Of course he wouldn't care for anything."

"Now, you just stop," said Altamera, smiling. "You don't know how he felt. By-and-by he went away—that was one time when he heard Robert was coming. He couldn't stay and see him."

"I don't wonder," murmured Leslie.

"I wasn't sorry to have him go," admitted Altamera. "I'd have felt as foolish as a jaybird if they'd both been there at the same time."

"What a heartless little thing you are, Altamera! Foolish as a jaybird! You ought to have felt guiltier than the sparrow that killed cock-robin."

Owen was grateful for this story. It interested him, and made it easier for him to shut out the memory of the gray pier and the woman whom he saw standing there, against the rocks.



"Didn't you care at all?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I cared."

Something in her tone made him look at her closely again. For the first time a thrill of jealousy shot through his heart—of jealousy of anything but a shadow, a memory—this was a living, breathing reality—tall, dark Adams Fenn.

"And how much did you care?" he demanded, leaning over her and grasping her clasped fingers. Altamera met his eyes and smiled.

"I cared a great deal," she replied. "I expect I cared more than I ought to."

"And you sent him away?"

"I didn't have to send him away. We don't have to do such things in our part of Georgia," she stated with a proud little inflection. "I was engaged to Robert."

Owen had dropped her hands and had fallen back into his old position, leaning on



his elbow, only this time he had moved so that his face was in shadow. He did not speak.

"He said good-by to me one night," she went on, "and I never have seen him again. I didn't suppose he'd ever see Robert. I never knew he had till you told me. I am glad he took such good care of him. I reckon he took an interest in him on my account," she observed naïvely. "But then Adams was always mighty good to sick people—even down to the pickaninnies."

"But how much did you care for him?" persisted Leslie, from the shadow.

"Oh, you Yankees for questions!" laughed Altamera. Then she suddenly grew sober. "I cared for him so much," she said, "that it didn't seem like there was anybody else in all the Southern States."

Leslie forgot even to smile.

"And did he know it?"



"I never told him," said Altamera simply. "I was engaged to Robert," she said again.

"And did you never think of—of breaking with Robert?"

"Oh, no." Altamera looked at him over her shoulder, in surprise. "We didn't either of us ever think of that?"

Owen was sick at heart. What would she think of him if she knew in what a tumult of faithlessness and passion and reproach he had existed for the last ten days? To be sure, neither had he ever thought of a rupture of their engagement—but that was all that could afford him comfort. It seemed to him that he had breathed in an atmosphere of duplicity that would have stifled Altamera; yet it was not his fault—still less was it Antoinette's fault. It was the cruelty of fate, that was all.



"Altamera," he said humbly enough, "do you care for Adams Fenn now?"

Perhaps, even as he waited for her answer with a jealous tightening of his heart, he half hoped she would say yes. He lived lately in a world of fierce contradictions.

"No," answered Altamera, smiling, "not in that way. I am engaged to you now, you know," and she looked back at him a second time. "I think, Leslie, I've caught your Northern ways a little, though I'm not like Cousin Lena yet," and she shook her head. "But I think about whether I love you or not. I like to say to myself that I love you; not often," she added frankly, "but sometimes. I never used to think about what I was thinking."

It was not easy for Owen to answer her, and yet he loved her.

"Yes, I love her," he said to himself as he went away from the cottage that night.



"I shall always love that pretty child; but as for Antoinette—she is the one woman in the world."

But as he walked a while up and down the stretch of sand when the tide was coming noisily in, it grew upon him with startling force that that pretty child had met and turned aside—almost with a smile, it seemed—the tremendous current of faithless love in which his soul was driving hither and thither. He had thought her unconscious—ignorant of the stormier phases of emotion, but instead of being sheltered from them they had passed over her and left her calm. It was easy to say that hers was no deep nature to be stirred by a tempest. To do Owen justice he had not entire confidence in the sunless depths of his own nature. He only felt that the positions of tutor and learner had been suddenly and cruelly reversed.



## CHAPTER IX.

No protesting, dearest.

Don't we both know how it ends?

—*St. Martin's Summer.*

I propose curing it by counsel.

—*As You Like It.*

It was the first week in October. Britton was nearly empty. Only the few fishermen who dwelt thereabouts kept up the traditions of a busy shore, and inland the farms had lost the air of yielding their increase in a business-like up-early-in-the-morning-and-late-at-night way, and the farmers seemed to have little to do except to pile up apples in large heaps about the yellowing orchards. Undoubtedly there were other things that might be done, but there was no particular hurry.



Only the crickets cared to hurry nowadays.

Owen lay stretched on the dry turf at the top of a low cliff, which rose beyond a strip of sand. Beside him sat Antoinette, and behind them both a second division of the cliff rose still higher, only to slope rapidly down on the other side into stony fields. They were sheltered from the wind, which was blowing steadily and seemed to be increasing, although here it was not cold, where the October sun mellowed the air and warmed even the barren surface of the rocks.

Antoinette was conscious to her finger-ends of her companion, of the scene, of the dangerous tension of this last day, but with the somewhat unusual inclination, which was natural to her, to separate herself for the time from what was really of absorbing interest, she was thinking not of



any one of them. Instead she was reviewing her parting, a week before, with Richard.

"Well, Antoinette," he had said, "I am going. It is the only becoming thing for me to do just now. Later, I shall probably come and dine with you once a week, as usual. To-day I have my answer, and an answer of some sort is the only thing I really insisted on, you know."

The half-sweet, half-cynical smile, which was entirely his own, and which made Antoinette more fond of him than anything else, crossed his lips.

"Yes, I know, Dick. You were always moderate in your demands."

"I think you will be sorry after I have left you," he went on. "Not sorry for your decision—I am not flattering myself to that extent—but sorry that you won't see me again for some little time."



"I am sorry already." Her voice trembled a little.

"Yes," she said to herself to-day, "my voice was certainly not steady. It must have amused Dick."

Possibly it had amused him, and possibly not. He gave no sign one way or another.

"I hoped the necessity of making up your mind was a way out of it that you wanted," he said. "I see I have only helped to crystallize the present state of affairs."

"I suppose you say things of that sort," she said quickly, "that I may be less sorry to have you go."

"Perhaps," he answered, smiling again. "You see I really didn't think you would decide to lose me entirely. Good-by."

"I can not, Dick, I can not," she had almost called after him—but not in the least



because she loved him, and she knew this and was silent. Was she sorry? she wondered to-day. Would it have been better?

"So you knew me as long ago as that?" asked Owen at her side.

No, it was better as it was.

"Yes, I think I knew you very well, even then. And when you became engaged to Altamera, I seemed to know you better."

"And yet you seemed not to care to know me at all."

"I was afraid. I have learned to recognize a danger in men like you. They interest me. I can not help trying to interest them."

"And you usually succeed."

"Usually," replied Miss Swift calmly.

"That is what I am to you—what I have always been to you: a type—nothing but a type," said Owen discontentedly, as



he plucked a tall, yellow spear of rush-like grass. If he had hoped for contradiction he was disappointed.

"Nature can do nothing more for us than to put us in an interesting class," said Antoinette with sententiousness.

"I do not care for Nature's classification of me," said Owen. "That is an old and somewhat unsatisfactory story. It's yours I want."

"While you were engaged to Altamera I was yet more afraid," went on Antoinette. "I love Altamera."

"Heaven help me! so do I," said Leslie gravely.

"I would not have come to this place if I had known that you were all here before I promised. After that it seemed destiny. Destiny is such a convenient scapegoat."

"And to-morrow it is over," groaned Leslie, burying his face in his arms as he



lay. "To-morrow we go back to where there can be nothing between us any more that will remind us of what life might be—Remind me! Oh, God! shall I ever forget?"

Antoinette looked down at him for an instant. It was well, perhaps, that he did not see her. His strong, brown hand grasped tensely the tuft of grass with which he had trifled a moment before. Antoinette had a sudden impulse to lay her own fingers on his, and let him grasp those instead. Why not? It meant comradeship, and that she owed him. But she did not. She looked away again, and said softly:

"Does truth sound bitter as one at first believes?' Probably not. Do not let us think of it to-day, at least. This whole, long, beautiful afternoon is ours."

"Oh, let me be miserable," said Owen,



raising his head. "I can not even be miserable after to-day. What shall I do to forget how to love you, Antoinette?" he went on. "It was not hard to learn, though it ought to have been like walking on red-hot plowshares."

"That knowledge might go as easily as it comes," sighed Antoinette. "How many of us have wished that since Eve!"

"Shall I remember that you have a voice and eyes that haunt me wherever I am and however loud other claims on my attention? Shall I remember that you are the deepening and intensifying element of all the lovely moods of sea and land, that we—you and I, Antoinette—have watched together? Shall I remember that you are the harmonizing force that prevents any jarring chord? Shall I remember that you are a revelation?"

He spoke low and intensely, watching



her as if it were the last time she would listen to him. Her eyes were shadowed with what might have been regret or only the feeling evoked by his passionate words. She did not stop him—whether that she would not or could not, she was not sure.

“These are the things that I shall remember,” said Owen. “And these are not the things that will teach me to forget how to love you.”

There was silence a moment—silence except for the waves that were driving each other faster up the sand below them.

“When a man has a general sense of having lost his bearings and being in danger of hopelessly drifting,” went on Owen, “how certain words and expressions float into his mind, he does not know how, and seem to give him a sort of grip, now and then, of realities.



'Dearer is love than life, and fame than gold,  
But dearer than them both, your faith once plighted,  
hold.'

"I've been saying over those old-fashioned lines of Spenser's for weeks as if they were a sort of charm."

"It is that half-unconsciously remembered wisdom that stands us in good stead at critical times, I think," said Antoinette. "I used to think that we gathered ourselves together, intelligently, to meet a crisis. Now I think that we are overwhelmed by it, and only catch at such scraps of early teaching and belief as seem to float near us in the confusion."

"That is true," answered Owen; "it is well to have traditions at hand." He paused a moment and then went on: "But yet, sometimes I get no further than 'Dearer is love than life.'"



Antoinette seemed not to listen, and Owen said no more.

“I used to think about myself that I was two things”—Antoinette spoke dreamily, her face still turned away—“that I was strong and that I was straightforward—naturally, I mean. I sometimes was weak on trifling occasions, I knew, but I was sure that if the time ever came when there was much at stake, I should recognize the crisis, and be firm as a rock. That I should stoop to nothing that it would shame me to remember.”

“And you are strong,” said Owen ; “ you have stooped to nothing.”

Again Antoinette did not appear to hear him.

“Now, as I said, we have changed all that. I wonder if it is by yielding in little things that one loses one's perceptions of what a crisis is? Or if it is only that one



grows hard and untrue? For days I have listened to your voice telling me that you have loved me, and since the first time I have heard it without much of a shock. And yet you are the man whose love is pledged to a woman whom I love and who trusts me. It seems to me that there can be nothing more despicable. Theoretically I despise myself."

"You shall not despise yourself," interrupted Owen hotly. "And what of me? It is I that have done all."

"I have nothing to do with what you have done," said Antoinette calmly. "I am speaking of myself. Theoretically I say, I despise myself. And yet where is that revulsion of feeling that ought to affect me before a great wrong? I do not tingle with the sense of my own treachery, as I should with a sense of guilt if I had stolen Altamera's ear-rings. And yet I



have done worse. I wonder why it is? Am I so hard that I am beyond it, or am I so small that I can not rise to it?"

"I will tell you what it is," exclaimed Owen. "It is because you are a woman and not a Rule of Three, and can feel truth that is not mathematical. We have not gone about to do this thing. It is because, from the beginning of the world, love has been too strong a thing for abstractions. You recognize the fact that here is something come into our lives which is not to be passed over and treated as if it was not. Why should you shut your eyes to it? If you were making another suffer you might. But you are not making another suffer, and it would be childish to put it behind you and say, 'See, there is nothing there.'"

Owen spoke swiftly and warmly. He



felt that he was speaking truth, and was glad that he could formulate it so readily.

Antoinette shook her head.

“That sounds better than any reason I can give, I am afraid,” she said. “It seems to me rather that our mental visions grows defective as we look at things so near. Love, Treachery, Faithlessness—they are sounding names, but when we hold them in our hands, as it were, they have become part of us—our moods, our life, our small individual experience—they can not be such great things, after all. There is no need of posing in their presence.”

She might have been speaking of the sailboats that were dancing about before their eyes on the rough water, so calm was the irony of her words. There was little danger of her ever tearing a passion to tatters, if, as she said, she held it in her hands.



"Antoinette," said Owen, "I love you."

He was hungry for emotion this afternoon. She was too distant, too even, too calm. She had always held him at arm's length. He had never denied himself the subtle pleasures of such spells as this, and now, when he loved this woman as perhaps he had never loved before, and must say good-by to her, he refused to be put off with abstractions.

"Do not say it again," she replied. "It should not have been said at all. There is an effrontery in your saying it, and in my listening to it, that pains if it does not shock me."

"But, Antoinette," he pleaded, "will you not once say that you care? Will you not stop for an instant looking at it from every standpoint but mine, and remember what it all means to me? For you it is an episode. For me it is a wounding, searing



experience. May I not have some dangerous sweetness, as well as bitterness?"

He had abandoned his recumbent position, and was leaning, one arm thrown up under his head, against the steep bank, and looked with passionate entreaty into her face. There was a slight movement above their heads, the rustle of a dress, some gravel rolled down the bank, and they did not hear it. Indeed, such slight sounds were hardly perceptible above the tumbling water and the fresh breeze.

Antoinette did not trust herself to meet his eyes. In the sound of his voice there was danger enough.

"How unfair you are!" she said. "How pitifully ungenerous! Oh, I know you so well!" she exclaimed passionately, arguing against herself, while she arraigned him. "I know your weakness, as well as your



strength. Why—" then she checked herself abruptly.

"Leslie Owen," she went on, turning upon him with defiance, but speaking deliberately, "I shall never tell you that I love you."

"I reckon you might just about as well," said a slow, scornful voice, and Antoinette and Leslie faced Altamera, as she stood above them on the bank, looking down with what seemed very much like contempt.

There was silence for a moment. Antoinette turned deadly pale, but she was the first to speak.

"Altamera," she said, "you stand above us like an avenging angel, and you have the right to say what you will."

Altamera did not answer her.

"Leslie," she said, "give me your hand and help me down."



Without a word Owen lifted her from the steep bank, and she stood on a level with them. Antoinette looked at her in wonder. If she had been in Altamera's place she could no more have let Leslie Owen touch her hand than she could have held it in the fire.

"I don't know as there's much for me to say"—Altamera's slow accents were doubly, trebly scornful for their indifference. "I don't know why you have done it, Antoinette. You have always treated people right well, and I never expected you would do a thing like this. I reckon that's why you've done it, because you knew I wouldn't expect it." She added the last words with a half-unconscious irony that cut Antoinette like a knife, and made her turn her face away, although the tears did not come into her eyes.

"Altamera," said Owen gently, "Miss



Swift has done nothing treacherous. It is I alone that you must blame."

Altamera turned to him now with the slow, unconscious grace that he had so delighted in always. As she spoke she pushed her hair back from her forehead with that familiar gesture he had noted when first he saw her. The wind had been rioting in the short locks, for they had all three moved a little out of the shelter. Apparently she waived the question of where the blame lay—she had assigned that once for all, and Antoinette felt keenly that she was right—perhaps too keenly for justice.

"You've laughed at me enough times, Leslie," she said, "about our Southern chivalry. I rather think it is different from your Yankee notions." There was about her neither anger nor apparent excitement of any kind. "I don't know as a Georgia



gentleman would stand by Antoinette any better than you do, but I expect he wouldn't have treated either of us like you have, in the first place."

"Altamera," said Antoinette, in low, controlled tones, "if you had heard a little more you would have heard Mr. Owen say that he loved—not me—but you. He knows—we both know—that this is nothing but a brief unreason—a midsummer madness. It has nothing—nothing to do with his love for you."

Altamera looked at her and smiled a little.

"I expect you do feel right badly about it," she said, not unsympathetically.

"Yes," answered Antoinette quickly, "and I am the one to feel badly. It is not for you to do so, or—or Mr. Owen. We shall all go away to-morrow, and we shall not see each other again until this is all forgotten."



She spoke hastily, feverishly, now. She felt that so much depended on what was said in these few minutes. Things must be adjusted, there should be no crash, no severing of ties that should be irrevocable. Let this interview be tided over and things would adjust themselves. She had been in stormy scenes before now, and they had always finally yielded to her tact, and, it must be said, to her generosity. She watched Altamera eagerly. She was so calm, surely she would listen to reason. She could not know how deeply the waters had been troubled—she should never know.

All this time Leslie had not spoken, except when he entered his defense of Antoinette. There was so little for him to say. What he had to say to these two women must not be said in each other's presence—for their sakes as well as his



own. He stood there waiting, gravely watching Altamera—not once had he trusted himself to look at Antoinette—but under his calm exterior he was feeling all the bitterness of the terrible mistake he had made. Either of these two women was worthy of a life's love, and with one he had madly trifled, and the other he could not ask to reach out her hand and take what he had given her, even if she would. He felt as he had now and then felt before, as he used to feel more often in the old days with Robert Morton—the weakness and futility of his own character. Perhaps they recognized it too, as they looked at him. He, with his intuitive grasp of emotions, felt that he read it in Antoinette's eyes, and it added tenfold to the rush of bitterness that enfolded him. Yet neither of these women, whatever their other sentiments, could miss the charm of



the man, even now. It seemed as if the grace which was perceptible in all he said and did distinguished him, now that he said and did nothing, but stood like a culprit awaiting sentence. They knew so well the attraction of his voice and the sympathetic, appreciative companionship he could give, that, once enjoyed, was always missed thereafter.

“Leslie,” asked Altamera, “do you think you’d better say anything?”

“No, Altamera,” he answered, “I think not—only this: Miss Swift is right. I have never dreamed of being false to you in deed—in any point within my own control. As for the rest—I hope it will be as she says.” His voice fell with involuntary doubt at the last words, and for the first time his eyes met Antoinette’s. Her paleness frightened him, and he was conscious of a tumultuous impulse to go over



to her and take her hands, and tell her that if she cared as much as that it was all sure to come right. But there was no danger of Owen's ever doing anything in as execrably bad taste as that. In an instant their looks turned from each other toward Altamera, as if with her lay the decision concerning the future of all three of them, as it did in a sense. It was incongruous that this Southern girl, with her insouciance, and her unlikeness, and her ignorance, should hold in her hands the destinies of these two self-contained natures, who in most things were so sufficient unto themselves. Perhaps Antoinette was the most miserable of the three. It had been hers to have misgivings, which it had not been Altamera's: hers, not to be able to drown the thought of treachery in the intoxication of the present, as it had been Owen's; and above all was her disappoint-



ment in herself. She had been found wanting; swift retribution had come with her failure—the very, particular retribution she had not dreamed possible. We all feel there is a choice in retributions.

It should be—it must be, even yet averted—and she watched Altamera almost breathlessly. Altamera was hesitating before she answered Owen's last words.

"I expect you think you'd have to keep on hoping a good while, don't you, Leslie?" she asked calmly. Without letting him answer, she added:

"I don't believe there is anything more for me to say either. I think I'll go now, Antoinette, and not wait on you and Leslie."

The quaint, Southern term of expression, in the sweet, languid tones, brought the swift tears to Antoinette's eyes. It emphasized to her ears the pathetic fact that



Altamera was a stranger in a strange land, and that she had been using her power to abuse the confidence of a girl who stood alone, away from her own home and her own people.

“Altamera,” she said, “you have not said anything yet. You do believe the truth—do you not?—that which is truth in this wretched misunderstanding—all that is not exaggeration and accident and transient folly.” Antoinette did not glance at Leslie; she might have faltered then, and while she did not see him, she could feel that what she was saying was indeed the truth. Her voice grew full of entreaty as she went on.

“You believe that I can never really come between you two?—Altamera, you believe this.”

Altamera smiled a little.

“Antoinette,” she said, still with the



same, cool, gentle friendliness, "it won't make any difference what you say to me. I don't know you and Leslie Owen right well, but I know all about Altamera Clayton."

Antoinette wrung her hands with a despairing little gesture, but said no more. She was powerless, and things must go as this calm girl should decide. She was proud and had been self-confident, and defeat was a hard thing to bear. Defeat and a sense of being in the wrong were intolerable—but she gave up.

After she had finished speaking, Altamera began to make her way along the narrow little path which clambered down the side of the cliff. It was not dangerous, only narrow and a little rough. For an instant Owen hesitated. Antoinette still stood her face toward the sea, her hands clasped, silent. It seemed so brutal to leave her there alone, but she was not the



woman to whom he owed all allegiance that might be reparation.

Moreover, he knew well enough what Antoinette would wish, indeed what was the only thing that she would tolerate; so, without a word, he followed Altamera down the path.

The wind blew so noisily she did not hear him at first, and she walked with care, for she was not much used to climbing. Owen watched, waiting to offer assistance, should she need it, but she seemed in no danger of slipping, and he felt it would not do for him to incur a suspicion of officiousness. Just as she stepped on the strip of sand at the foot of the little cliff, she heard him behind her, and turned to face him.

"Leslie Owen," she said deliberately, though for the first time her voice quivered a little, "what are you coming with me for?"

"I am coming with you, Altamera," he



answered very gravely, "because I have a certain right to do so—a right that I shall not resign until you yourself declare that it is no longer mine—and one which I hope to keep as reverently as it deserves."

"I reckon all questions of rights are over between you and me," she said, still as deliberately. "Perhaps Cousin Lena, or some one like that, could understand how it is you feel you have any of them left, but they are not sure enough rights to me any longer. Go back to Antoinette."

Though she did not raise her voice, her tones grew as imperious as if she were one of the old slaveholders of her native State: "Go back to Antoinette and tell her you are not mine any longer. Go back and tell her she may say what she likes to you now. I shall not listen again. It is nothing to me what anybody says to Leslie Owen."



"I could not say that to her," said Owen, "and she would not hear me if I did—do you not know that? Will you not let me walk home with you?" he asked gently, after an instant's pause. Without a word, Altamera swept him with her cool, indolent glance, and turned away. When she had taken a few steps she looked back over her shoulder, as he waited.

"I reckon you heard what I said, Leslie," she observed, and Owen stood still and lifted his hat, for he knew it was not for him to follow her.

In a few minutes he was again at the place where he had left Antoinette, but she had gone. He looked about for her, but she was out of sight; probably she had gone swiftly away, across the fields. Neither did he dare to follow her. Deserted by them both, he stood leaning back against the cliff, gazing moodily out over



the rough water. He felt bitterly the wretched complication that was the work of his hands.

“I am a contemptible figure enough,” he said to himself, biting fiercely the ends of his mustache. “I can see the detestable humor of my situation too, as well as another man. I am the hero that would fain love two women at once, and they have both left me, and I dare to follow neither the one nor the other. It is no easier for me that I can see myself personating the farcical element of the tragedy. Heaven knows the tragedy is real enough!—Antoinette, my darling—it is something to you after all!”

Possibly it is a good illustration of the errors in the law of compensation, that Owen was, of the three, the least hopelessly unhappy.



## CHAPTER X.

Strange ! that very way—Love begun.

—*In a Year.*

No, 'tis not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough.

—*Romeo and Juliet.*

ALTAMERA walked quickly along the sands toward the cottage. The wind blew her hair over her face, and flung the long black lace scarf, knotted about her throat, first over one shoulder, then over the other. The incoming tide sent encroaching lines of foam almost to her feet, but she did not heed either the one or the other. Now and then she looked out to sea, with a certain rare perplexity in her eyes, then again she looked straight before her, along the way she was going. Possibly even the yellow sunlight and the blue



foam-tipped water seemed cold and unfriendly, as she remembered the soft, clinging air and the perfumed shades of her Southern home.

Miss George stood on the piazza, wrapped in a warm crimson shawl.

"Why, Altamera," she called out, "what do you mean by taking such a walk? I watched you out of sight, and you have been away nearly an hour. Did you not meet Leslie?"

"Yes, Cousin Lena, I met Leslie."

There was something in her tones that prevented Miss George, she did not know why, from asking where he was. Altamera seated herself on the step of the piazza as though she were tired. Lena looked at her with a touch of uneasiness. She had not been entirely blind to what had been going on in the other lives so near hers these last weeks, but she had been very



slow in opening her eyes, and after all there had been almost nothing perceptible to even the most suspicious scrutiny, and Lena George was not suspicious. With some acquired cynicism, she nevertheless was a person of generous beliefs, and she refused to admit to herself that faithlessness could be part of Owen's nature. She had seen him under circumstances where he had been almost aggressively true. While she could not regard Antoinette as an entirely simple person, she admired her, and recognized in her a certain nobility of character—and more than all, she said to herself, for she was a wise though not a watchful woman, that they would soon all go away, and Owen would be again wholly under Altamera's sway, when there should be no longer this temptation at his door. Still she looked at Altamera this morning a little anxiously.



"Cousin Lena," said Altamera, her hands clasped around her knees, her head resting on the railing behind her, "I reckon it's about time I went back to Georgia."

"Why, Alta, child, are you tired of our cold North already?"

Altamera reached up her hands and took hold of her cousin's without looking at her.

"I'm not tired of your North, Cousin Lena," she said. "It isn't cold where you are, honey."

After the little caress, her hands fell again into their former position and she added: "But I've been thinking I'd better go home. I reckon I'd like to see the old place again."

"Don't say it in that tone, Alta," exclaimed Miss George, pained instinctively. Yet it was certainly not unnatural that this



girl should be a little homesick after nearly a year's absence, though she had not been entirely happy before she came away. "You make me think of Mary Stuart's '*Frankreich's fernen Ocean.*'"

"Well, I guess nobody's going to behead me," answered Altamera reasonably.

"We will talk with Leslie," said Miss George lightly; "he may have something to say about it."

"Yes, you may talk with Leslie, if you like," replied Altamera indifferently, "but I expect I belong down South."

Just then a servant spoke to Miss George, and she went into the house, leaving Altamera still seated on the steps. By and by she grew cold. The glow from her unaccustomed exercise had faded, and she looked white and a little pathetic as she rose and walked irresolutely to and fro in the beating, exultant



wind. It was so unusual for her to be perplexed. More than once before she had stood in the midst of complications and let them eddy about her, but she had left them to adjust themselves. This time the mysterious quality in them touched her more nearly. Her instinct was not to grapple with the difficulties that pressed upon her. Altamera had never grappled with anything in her life, but they jostled her, they dizzied her, they hurt her. She thought of Leslie's letter to her. It had been an incident in the level dreariness of those first weeks. She thought of her first sight of him in Lena's drawing-room. She had been glad that Robert's friend, who had stood by him when he died, who had seemed to take so much thought for her and her sorrow, was this tall, strong, handsome man, whose voice and manner had something in them, from the first, different from what she



saw and heard in others. It had always seemed as if for his strength anything would be easy. He had not been very strong, after all. Possibly it hurt her more than anything else that Antoinette had been untrue — Antoinette, who had been her first woman friend. It had not occurred to her to question the sincerity of the friendship. She saw now why the people up here had such a way of thinking about everything they felt or did. They had to—it was the only way. Perhaps she had better learn to do it, too. Still, she was irresolutely pacing back and forth before the piazza in an effort to be warm. At last she came to a decision, and, turning from the house, walked straight down to the beach where the boats were moored. The old fisherman who took charge of them was not there, but had left a somewhat indiscreet but not altogether inefficient rep-



representative, in the shape of his youngest son.

"Sizer," called Altamera. No one had ever ascertained what Sizer's whole name was, for Sizer certainly seemed to be an abbreviation. Sizer himself gave an unintelligible account which might or might not be strictly veracious, Sizer's accounts being liable to this cankering doubt. As to the rest of the inhabitants, Sizer seemed to be a very good name, as names go, and they never thought of challenging it.

"Yes, marm," replied Sizer. So far as he had a heart susceptible to the tenderer emotions it belonged to Altamera.

"She don't never seem to be in such an all-fired hurry as most of 'em," he asserted, which to a person of Sizer's sedentary pursuits was in itself an attraction. To-day, however, his confidence was destined to be shaken.



"Sizer, I want to get my boat right away—d'ye hear, sir?"

Apparently even Altamera might be said to be in a hurry. From her lips the command seemed, perhaps, less incisive than from another's, but still she evidently meant to have the boat before long. Sizer relinquished, somewhat gloomily, the congenial occupation of firmly securing by physical pressure three of the radii of a star-fish, for the satisfaction of watching him manipulate the others, and prepared to pull Altamera out to the light, little sail-boat moored in deeper water.

"I shouldn't wonder if it should come on to blow," he suggested.

"Yes, Sizer, I reckon it's going to be a sure enough blow before night, but I'm not afraid," answered Altamera, stepping into the little craft.

"I knew you wasn't afraid, but I didn't



know but what you'd like to have me go with yer."

"No, not this time. You're a right smart boy in a boat, but I'm going by myself to-day," and Sizer received an intoxicating smile from his goddess in recognition of his solicitude, as she set her white sail and let it be filled out by the stiff breeze. Even in these unbelieving days it does not occur to us to disobey the behests of our goddesses when they are actually with us.

Two hours later Antoinette appeared on Miss George's piazza white and miserable. Lena came out to meet her.

"I hear that Altamera has not come in yet,—that she is out alone in her boat," said Antoinette hurriedly.

"Yes," answered Miss George; "I do not know what the child can be thinking of, to stay out in such weather." She



would not show the anxiety that she felt, but there was no need—Antoinette knew it.

“She understands how to manage her boat,” she added.

“Oh, yes, she understands perfectly well how to manage her boat,” repeated Antoinette mechanically. Then both women turned and looked out to the angry sea, which was fretting at the approach of a storm, rolling menacing waves up the beach and over which the early twilight of a sunless afternoon was settling down. For the bright sunlight of the early part of the day had vanished, and the spray was flinging itself under a gray and cloudy sky. Miss George walked restlessly down the path and back again. Antoinette stood still, shivering a little in spite of the heavy wrap that covered her from head to foot.

“Leslie has gone down to the beach



where the boats are," said Miss George, as she passed Antoinette the second time. "He went out after her once, but she steered away from him, and he thought he did more harm than good."

Antoinette caught her breath, with a half-sob.

"After all, as he says, Altamera is safe enough if—if—she is not careless. Still, he is desperately anxious, but does not mean me to see it."

Antoinette waited until she came toward her again, and then she stepped in front of her.

"Miss George," she said, "why don't you say it? I know what you are thinking of me. I am waiting—" her voice faltered a little and then went on—"I am waiting for you to say it. It can not make things any worse—or me any unhappier. But perhaps that—to have me unhappier is



what you would like," she spoke questioningly. "I think if I were in your place that is what I should like."

Miss George looked at her curiously. She had never seen this girl so moved before. There were dark lines about her eyes, and she would evidently have broken down if she had not been too miserable to cry.

"You are entirely wrong, Antoinette," she answered gravely. "Why should I blame you—or anybody—much? What has happened was in the nature of things, I suppose. You might have been stronger perhaps, and Leslie—Leslie should have known enough to go away." Her voice was a little harder when she spoke of Owen. "But we are all unhappy enough—Heaven knows! Why should I want to make you any unhappier? Perhaps if you had come vaunting your triumph," and



Miss George smiled sadly enough, "I should feel differently. But you are not doing that."

"Oh, Miss George, don't!—please don't. I can not bear it," cried Antoinette. "I am so defeated—so worsted."

"That is curious, isn't it?" said Lena, "when it is Altamera who has lost? It is so with us women usually, I think. Our triumphs are more than half defeat." Then she turned away to the sea again. "I wish Leslie would come," she said. "He would, if there was anything to tell."

"He has told you all about it, I suppose?" asked Antoinette, still in the subdued tones which did not seem natural to her.

"Yes, he told me all when he came in. I wish I could have known it when I saw Altamera; she was homesick—poor little



girl! I should not have let her go away alone."

She paused a moment. Altamera's words, with the pathetic cadence she had not understood, came back to her and brought the tears to her eyes.

"Oh, Miss George!" cried Antoinette, "what do you think of me!"

Lena looked at her, startled by the misery of her voice. She had thrown her arms around one of the slender pillars, and clasped it as if for support, her head resting against it, and the wind tossing her dress and hair. It was so different from the Antoinette she knew, this clinging figure, with pale face and frightened eyes, that Lena felt instantly that it was she that was most to be pitied, after all.

"It is I have done it—and how do you think I am feeling now?"

Lena went over to her.



"Antoinette," she said, "I think you are exaggerating the danger that Altamera is in. And I think you are exaggerating your share of the blame of all this unhappiness."

"I never exaggerated anything in my life," interrupted Antoinette. "I under-rate danger always. I underrated this—from the beginning."

Miss George put resolutely away from her all the bitter anxiety and self-reproach which she felt were justly her own portion, that she might lighten the load that perhaps—only perhaps, but still it was within a dreadful possibility—this girl might have to bear all her life long.

"If there was danger from the beginning," she said gently, "there would always have been danger somewhere—for Leslie. I think I have known it from the first."



"Then, why, oh, why did you not take her away?" sighed Antoinette.

"Not this particular danger—I did not foresee that," answered Lena. "But I have never been quite happy in this engagement. I knew Leslie Owen so well, I could not quite believe that Altamera would always satisfy him. Not that he should have felt any want in her," she interrupted herself to say. "He should never have done so."

"No, never!" assented Antoinette wearily. "I know that. But I know Leslie Owen too," she added under her breath.

"He is not a difficult man to know—for some of us," went on Lena, "but Altamera could never know him, and it was that made me afraid. But it was not for me to prevent it, I decided; and he was so much in love with her—and he can make a



woman very happy." Still the conventional phrase—she thought. Perhaps that power was not such an advantage, after all! Antoinette moved her head restlessly.

"But this was sure to come some time, Antoinette, and better now than later. Now, come down to the beach. We are both too uneasy to stay here. I did not want to go alone. I am glad you have come—and together we will watch Altamera's landing."

Antoinette raised her eyes and looked at Miss George steadily.

"I admire you," she said, "more than any woman I ever saw. I never could have been as fair as that."

When the two women reached the shore they saw Owen talking with the old boatman. As he saw them he came toward them. Instinctively Antoinette paused as



if she would go back, then went quietly on. Her anxiety was too great to allow her to dwell on her personal relations with Leslie—that seemed to belong to another phase. Until Altamera should have come back there was nothing else that could concern them much.

“There she is,” said Leslie, pointing to a little boat off on the water—almost the only one out. “I think she is coming in. God grant she come safe.”

He was pale, but his voice was quite calm, and the glance of recognition with which he acknowledged Antoinette's presence was entirely natural and free from restraint. Antoinette felt a sort of numb surprise as she recognized this. He bore no marks of a conflict such as she had waged with herself. He was as strong, as cool as ever. Apparently he had not lost his grasp of the things she had



felt slipping from her hands—and yet he had never held them as firmly as had she.

“There seems nothing to be done but to wait,” he said.

“I don’t know as there’s any other man ’long this shore got sech a fool for a boy as I have,” drawled the old sailor, who had also approached. He looked at Antoinette, and she supposed afterward she must have smiled assentingly, for he went on:

“I says to Sizer, ‘Whoever was the tarnation fool that gave the lady the boat in sech a blow.’ ‘I be,’ says he. ‘And what ’d you do that for?’ I asked him. ‘Cause the lady wanted it,’ says he. ‘Wal,’ says I, ‘I’ll be dashed if I know where ye git your everlastin’ soft-headedness; it ain’t from me.’”

Antoinette had forgotten he was speak-



ing; Lena George had walked down close to the water's edge. He turned to Owen for sympathy.

"Ladies always think their wantin' to do a thing is reason enough for all Natur' to stand by and give 'em leeway," he remarked, "and so I told him. 'But it ain't in yer,' says I, 'to be anythin' but a fool.'"

Another time Antoinette would have been pleased by the old man's sympathetic anxiety taking the form of this just and amiable tribute, unaffected by family prejudice, with its side lights on the female understanding, but she did not heed him now. She was watching too eagerly that little white spot dancing so precariously up and down on the now seething waves. The water foamed up almost to her feet. Miss George re-commenced her pacing up and down. Owen moved about and watched the boat through a glass, dis-



cussing each motion with the sailor, but she stood still and silent, never taking her eyes from the sail-boat that looked so trifling and helpless in the temerity with which it set itself in the face of wind and waves. How purposeless seemed its course! Was it really coming nearer? Was it not drifting aimlessly, beaten hither and back? How perilously it tipped now and then! it seemed as if the white sail swept the water like the wing of a sea-bird. Would Altamera ever come riding lightly up to the landing-place, as she had done so many times before?

"If it would be any use," the old boatman was saying, "we could put out again and reach her easy—if she kept her course."

"It would be no use," she heard Owen answer shortly.

"She will not keep her course. I have tried it twice," he said, between his shut



teeth, to Lena George, a few moments later. "It only made matters worse."

There was a note of anger in his voice. Antoinette was glad he could be angry. It must be a relief from the awful dread that had taken entire possession of her. Unconsciously she knew that, after all, in certain ways he had more force than she. This morning she had not realized this, she had felt his limitations so clearly. Now, though thwarted, he did not seem helpless. He was indifferent to the gathering storm which buffeted her—in this merely physical advantage there was a solace—it seemed as if he were not yet at the end of his expedients. She did not formulate this—she did not even know that she felt it. She was conscious only of her own helplessness. Now and then she tried desperately to shake off the whole nightmare, and come back to clear-



ness and safety and her own cool mastery of personal relations.

The bitterness of defeat! There was nothing like it. It was something she had not known before—this crushing knowledge that she had dissolved what no amount of feminine tact could weld together again,—that there was no longer any veil of subtlety or self-deception; it had been torn away and left them all face to face with facts. Oh, the torture of the irrevocable! Had anybody ever written anything about the torture of the irrevocable? Of course that was what everybody had always written about, only they had other names for it.

An exclamation from Leslie roused her. The little boat had careened to the water's edge and must have taken in some water. Was it any nearer? Yes, a little, but still so far off. And this dreadful wind blow-



ing always. She had never hated anything as she did that wind. In the morning she had exulted in its freedom, now it seemed as if it would drive her mad. Too late? Of course it is too late. "Did you ever hear of anybody regretting a thing too early, or just in time? That is what regret means, that it is too late." Who was it said that? Oh, Bertha, in "One Administration."

"Antoinette," exclaimed Miss George, at her side, "she is certainly coming in."

Antoinette had turned her eyes away for a few moments; she could not watch the boat, the odds against it were too heavy. Now, as she followed the direction of Miss George's gaze, she could easily distinguish Altamera at the tiller. The rudder-ropes around her waist, with her strong little hands she managed the sail, watching each wave as it came toward



her and lifted the craft as if it had been a floating shingle. She came in swiftly now, having left behind her the cross-currents and more difficult sailing beyond. So fast and straight she kept her course that it seemed as if she would be driven far up the beach. Antoinette felt as if she should scream with the sense of relief. Miss George was at the water's edge with clasped hands and eager eyes. Leslie had stepped into the row-boat and was pulling out to meet her at the moorings. She could not sail away from him here, if she had wished to attempt it. It was no easy matter even in the miniature harbor to fasten the sail-boat and transfer its freight. If they had not both been experienced in such matters it would have been impossible without help.

Antoinette watched Altamera as, without a look at Leslie or his outstretched hand,



she steadied herself with an oar and sprang lightly from one boat to the other, and then waited for Owen to secure the one she had left.

"Why, are you there, Cousin Lena?" she called out gayly, as he pulled to the landing-place. "I reckon you all have been right scared about me."

Owen said something in a low tone. Antoinette caught the sound of his voice, but Altamera neither answered nor apparently heeded. As the keel grated on the sand Altamera spoke again :

"It was mighty nice out there, Cousin Lena," she asserted, "and windy sure enough. But I wasn't coming in before I was ready."

This time she glanced at Leslie an instant. Then she stood on the beach, graceful, self-poised, as ever, blown and tumbled by the wind, wet with the spray, but calm



and apparently a little surprised that Lena should grasp her hands and kiss her on both cheeks. To Antoinette it seemed suddenly that the whole situation had been madly overstrained. Her own mood of fifteen minutes ago—how unnatural it had been! Altamera had gone out sailing in rough water, and was perfectly capable of bringing herself back safe, as she had done. Not two weeks before she had done the same thing. To be sure, Leslie had been with her, but he had laughingly asserted on their return that he had had nothing to do but guard against fire, his cigarette being the only thing entrusted to his care.

How melodramatic had been the whole scene and her own share in it! Yet she was trembling from head to foot, and the laugh at her own fears, that was forcing itself to her lips, was hysterical; she knew



that and controlled it. Owen, who had not spoken to Altamera since his unregarded words on the boat, now came up and stood beside them. Miss George had walked on; she, too, felt the dangerous emotion of reaction.

“Come, all of you,” she called back.

Altamera looked up swiftly into the two grave faces before her, both pale, Antoinette's with tightly closed lips she could just keep from quivering, Leslie's inscrutable, saying nothing. “I reckon,” she said slowly, in full, sweet tones—“I reckon you all thought I was going to commit suicide.”

Antoinette started.

“Altamera!” she exclaimed involuntarily.

Owen did not speak; he waited for Altamera to go on. “Well, I wasn't,” she added. “You aren't either of you worth it.” Then she went swiftly on and joined her cousin.



Antoinette stood a moment motionless, white and startled.

“So even Altamera can be brutal, after all,” said Leslie quietly. Antoinette dropped her head in her hands and sobbed. It was the first time he had ever seen her cry. There was no one else on the lonely beach to see, the darkness had fallen very fast in the last few moments.

“My darling, I can not bear this,” cried Leslie, bending over her. “All the rest has been nothing to the pain of this! I will not have you cry,” he said passionately. Before she could protest he had drawn her into his arms and held her a moment, but she broke away from him.

“Do not touch me!” she exclaimed. “Do not come near me!” Her sobs came fast, but she held them back to speak. “Do not ever speak to me again—ever



—ever! I will never hear you say you love me,” and she stamped passionately on the hard sand. “I do not love you,” she went on. “You do not love me!”

“Antoinette, I will not be perjured even by your lips.”

“It is not love to hurt people and be treacherous and blind, and weak, and—contemptible! It is not love to be any of those things. We are not”—and she spoke with bitter emphasis, “Altamera is right—we are not worth it.”

With a sudden gesture of dismissal she turned away, but Owen was by her side instantly. She paused, thrilled with indignation which reached to her fingers' ends.

“I will neither touch you nor speak to you,” said Leslie quietly; “but I am going to walk home with you.”



Up at the cottage, Miss George and Altamera were sitting in front of the open fire, driving off the chill of the storm they had both been defying.

“Why did you frighten us all so, child?” asked Lena. “It was a dreadful thing that you did.”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you, Cousin Lena,” answered Altamera, pinning up her ruffled hair. “I reckon I didn’t know right well myself why I went. I couldn’t think of anything else, and I wasn’t quite sure about that. But I was sure when I was out there,” and she laughed a little. “I had to manage that boat.”

There was silence a few moments.

“And if you hadn’t managed it?” Miss George said in a low tone.

“I thought of that,” said Altamera slowly. “I thought of that first. But after a while—why then I reckoned I could,” and



she said no more about the problem she had faced that afternoon.

"Leslie must have gone down with Antoinette," she said tranquilly, after a while.

"Yes," answered Miss George. She was half afraid of what might come next. "It is dark, you know."

"That's what he ought to have done, anyway," asserted Altamera with gentle decision.

"Yes, I suppose so." Lena spoke with some hesitation.

"Why, you know he ought, Cousin Lena. His place isn't here any more, you know."

There was another pause. The firelight flickered wildly as the wind blew down the chimney. Miss George gazed at the younger woman, in wonder at her calmness. Not thus had she borne the wreck of her own life—so she had called it then.



She felt that wreck was too shattered a term to apply to this situation.

“Our family is not fortunate in its love affairs,” she said to herself bitterly. “And Leslie Owen is not fated to bring us happiness.”

“Cousin Lena,” said Altamera, throwing back her head, “a month from to-night I reckon I’ll be down in Georgia.”



## CHAPTER XI.

LAERTES.—Forward not permanent, sweet not lasting,  
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,  
No more.

OPHELIA.—No more but so?

—*Hamlet.*

Does Truth sound bitter as one at first believes?

—*The Lost Mistress.*

It was more than a year later that Owen traveled over the Southern railroad again.

Apparently nothing had grown, or moved, or been rooted up since his journey of several years before. The muffled trees still grew knee-deep in muddy swamps, the scattered houses were as lonely, the long reaches of forest as desolate, and the careless negroes as picturesque. This time, however, he did not lean listlessly against the window-pane and fret against the slow hours and the



long miles. The sun was shining, albeit low in the west, and the golden rays came in level with the car windows, giving a transient gleam to the Southern scenery, and possibly to his own spirit.

"Antoinette," he said, leaning forward, "the next station is Embree. To the right you will see the post-office, and in front of its door I first saw Altamera, on horseback, waiting for a letter."

Antoinette looked up from her book, and smiled as she closed it. Her profile, as she turned from him and looked out of the window, was as beautiful as ever. After a married life of two months, Leslie still found her eyes inscrutable. She was perfectly dressed, and the poise of her head and figure were as exquisite as when Owen first saw her in a ball-room. Against the dark cloth of the traveling cloak lay a large bunch of fragrant yellow



jessamine, which Leslie had brought into the train at the last stopping-place. The train slackened its speed as they came in sight of the long, lonely road, twisting into the forest. Another curve, and the old post-office was before them, and the train stopped. Owen felt like rubbing his hand across his eyes. There sat the old black postmaster in the doorway with the same air of gentle toleration for the swift impatience of iron and steam. There sat the charmed circle of adherents who thought that the whole duty of man was polite conversation. There, on a horse, which seemed the only restless creature, sat Altamera waiting for the mail.

Antoinette did not start.

"I think I expected to see her," she said quietly.

"But Lena George said she had not been in Embree for months," exclaimed



Owen ; "that she would, perhaps, never go back there."

"Very likely," replied Antoinette, "and so much for your masculine logic. As for me I did not care what Lena George said. There is Altamera, and I expected to see her."

"And, by Jove ! there is my friend the doctor. I must speak to him," and he rose.

"Leslie !" said Antoinette, looking up into his face in amazement ; "how can you think of doing anything in such wretched taste ? Besides, do you not see ?"

Obeying her gesture, Leslie resumed his seat. The train had already begun to move slowly. There was the long, dark Southerner who had watched with him beside Robert Morton's death-bed. He strolled, with that same lazy swinging gait, Owen remembered so well, from the



wood behind the office, the bridle of his horse over his arm, and joined Altamera. She looked down at him, smiling as he spoke to her. There was a light of utter contentment in his eyes as they fell from hers to the moving train and carelessly watched it pass out of sight, little knowing how much certain lives in it had entered into his own.

And Altamera—Altamera looked at the attenuated mail-bag indifferently; possibly she did not care for letters. So he with his hand on her horse's back, looking up into her eyes, she with one hand on her reins, the other falling idly by her side, with her sweet smile and her half-drooped head, they passed out of Owen's sight. He almost wondered if he had ever seen them anywhere else.

"I felt sure it would all come right, Antoinette," he said, looking at her with



an expression he felt to be permissible in the duskiness of the woods they had entered, in which expressions were not to be classified across the car ; " I knew such happiness as ours could not bring harm to any one else."

" You were always an optimist, Leslie," answered Antoinette, with a little sigh.

" But she is happy," he persisted. " You can not doubt that? And he is happy too—and he deserves happiness more than I do."

" Yes, she is happy," assented Antoinette, lifting her jessamine and breathing its fragrance. " I do not know that I ever doubted that she would be, after that first day—if I did then. Only," and she smiled gravely, " I have been defeated once, and since then I have believed in defeat."

" And I," he said, with an intonation that the passenger across the car would cer-



tainly have noticed had it reached him, "have loved once, and since then I have believed in love."

She did not answer him. She only turned from the fading light and met his eyes for a moment, and then, leaning her cheek on the pane, gazed out again on the changing sky.

"She was listening to him, was she not?" he said a minute later, as if it was a matter of some importance.

"Certainly she was listening to him. Women always listen," laughed Antoinette. "Did you think a woman never listened to any man but you?"

"It was so long before you listened to me," he murmured, "and I had hoped mine was not an isolated case."

"I listened to you the first time you ever spoke to me," she answered.

THE END.







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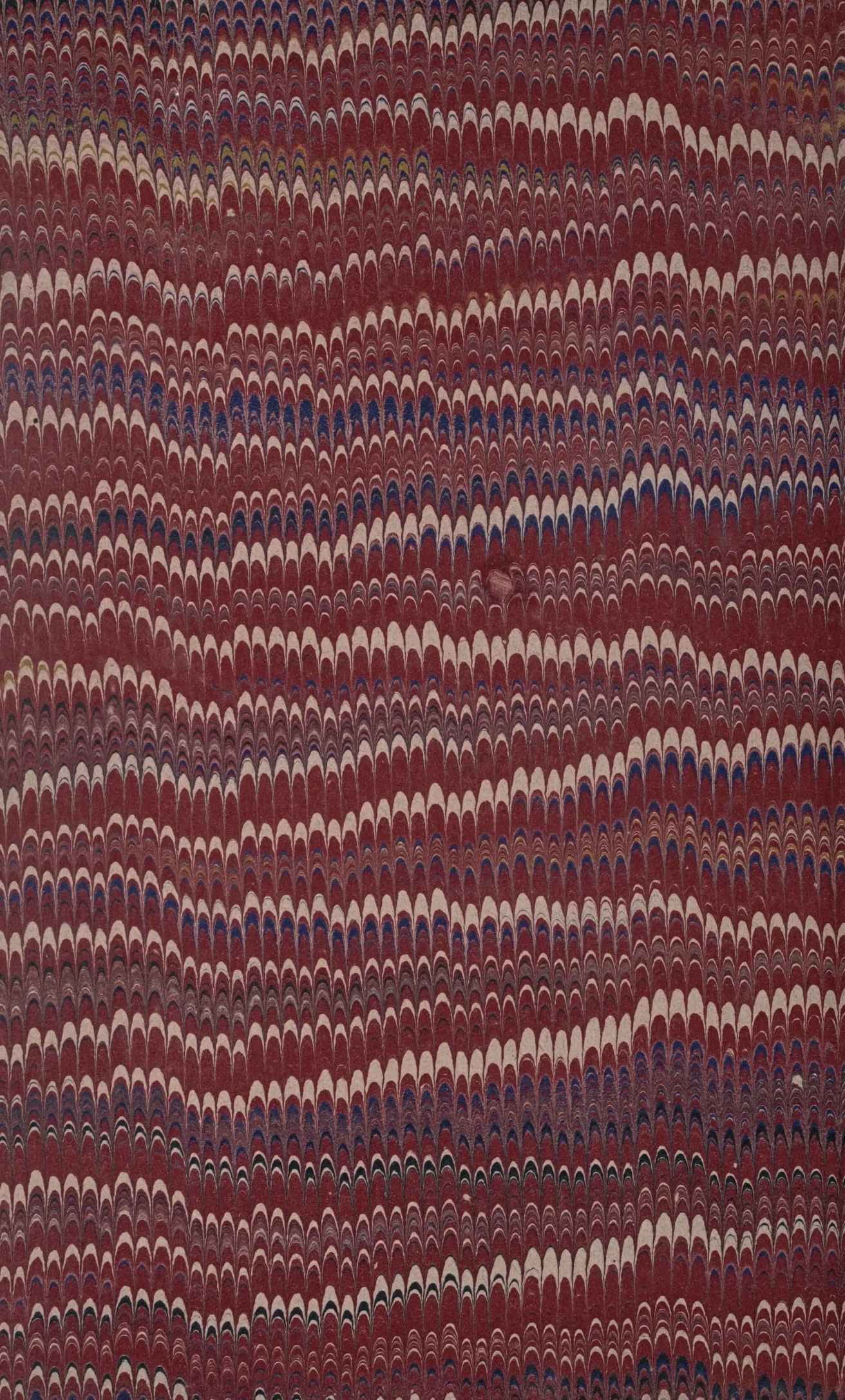














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